Survival in Auschwitz

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRIMO LEVI

Primo Levi was born to well-educated Jewish parents in 1919. A small, shy child and the only Jew in his school, Levi was often bullied by his classmates, but he excelled academically. As a teenager, Levi joined Italy's Fascist youth movement, as was expected of all young men. He studied chemistry at Turin University, but the the 1938 Italian Racial Laws (which encouraged heavy discrimination against ethnic Jews) made it difficult for him to find a supervisor for his thesis as well as his first job. After the Fascist leader Mussolini was deposed by his own government in 1943, German forces occupied northern and central Italy, established Mussolini as a puppet governor, and increased the persecution of Jewish people. Levi and several of his friends fled to the Alps and formed a small anti-Fascist coalition, but they were arrested by the Fascist militia later that year, who turned them over to the SS. He was taken from Italy to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. The year that Levi spent in the concentration camp is described in *Survival in Auschwitz*. One of Auschwitz's few survivors, Levi returned home to Turin, Italy in 1945, where he soon met his future wife Lucia and began working as a chemist. Levi began writing his recollection of Auschwitz in 1946, finishing the Italian manuscript by the end of the year with Lucia's help. He continued working as a chemist and would not publish another book for 16 years, by which time he was married and had two children. In 1963, Levi published *The Truce*, an account of journey home from Poland to Italy, and won an Italian literature award, the success of which grew the audience of his first memoir as well. Levi began writing more prolifically, authoring two more memoirs, one novel, several volumes of short stories, and a collection of poetry. However, the same year that *The Truce* was published, Levi began to suffer serious depression, apparently brought on by the trauma of Auschwitz he experienced decades before. Levi retired from chemistry in 1977 to write full-time, establishing himself as a respected figure of Italian literature. Levi died in 1987, having fallen from a three-story balcony. The presiding coroner determined it was a suicide and multiple biographers agree, though several of Levi's close friends dispute this claim. When Levi died, Elie Wiesel, another Holocaust survivor and author stated, "Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hitler became the German chancellor in 1933, at which point he swiftly set about creating the infrastructure and political momentum for the Holocaust, in which the Hitler's Germany would attempt to entirely eradicate Europe's Jewish population, which was in full operation by 1941. However, Primo Levi's arrest and transfer to Auschwitz came about as a result of Italy's Fascist alliance with Hitler's Germany in 1940. Although persecution of Jews in Italy had already increased as a result of the Mussolini's Fascist regime and the Italian racial laws of 1938, for a brief moment it looked as if Italy's era of fascism and oppression might end—Mussolini was deposed by his own government and Italy was ready to sign a treaty with the Allies. However, the Germans prevented this premature liberation by invading Italy, setting Mussolini free, and establishing him as the head of the Italian Social Republic, a puppet-government controlled by the Nazis. This resulted in the SS arrival at the prison camp which Levi was detained, ultimately leading to his year spent in Auschwitz.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* stands among the ranks of renowned Holocaust memoirs, providing a first-hand account of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. Sharing Levi's experience of the trauma of Auschwitz is Elie Wiesel's *Night*, in which he recounts his own experience of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, where he was imprisoned with his father as young man. However, *Night* dedicates more time describing the horror of the concentration camp, whereas *Survival in Auschwitz* puts much of its energy into examining the psychology of prisoners and what causes one man to survive rather than the other. In its more analytical, observational approach to suffering, Levi's memoir bears much in common with Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Like Levi and Wiesel, Frankl also survived Auschwitz as well as Dachau and the Theresienstadt Ghetto in Czechoslovakia. As a psychologist, Frankl's memoir dives deeply into the minds of the Jewish prisoners, seeking to understand precisely how the concentration camp affected them and how their views of the future affected their survival in the present.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Survival in Auschwitz
- **When Written:** 1946
- **Where Written:** Turin, Italy
- **When Published:** 1947
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland
- **Climax:** The German army evacuates Auschwitz, leaving Levi and many other prisoners to fend for themselves.

- **Antagonist:** Germany
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Working Title. *Survival in Auschwitz* was initially published as *If This is a Man*, fitting more appropriately with the memoirs study of dehumanization. However, US publishers thought that the original title was not clearly enough about the Holocaust.

Badge of Honor. American magician David Blaine was so moved by Primo Levi's memoir that he had Levi's prison number 174517 tattooed on his forearm.

PLOT SUMMARY

The events of *Survival in Auschwitz* are not all told in chronological order, but described as reflections on various aspects of life in the labor camp.

Primo Levi, a 24-year-old Italian Jewish man, is arrested by Italy's newly-arisen Fascist Republic. Believing that he is in greater danger as a political dissident, Levi announces himself to be a Jew and is quickly sent to an internment camp. A few weeks later, German SS officers arrive in the camp, and all of the Jewish prisoners in the camp are loaded onto trains and sent to Poland. After days without food or water and in horribly cramped compartments, the Jewish prisoners are unloaded at Auschwitz. Most of them are immediately sent to be exterminated in the crematoriums, though a small number of healthy men, including Levi, are sent to be laborers at a rubber factory called the Buna.

When Levi arrives at the Buna, he and his fellows are stripped naked and forced to stand in the cold. Their clothing and possessions are taken from them, and after a shower and more standing naked, they are each reissued raggedy clothing and a pair of wooden **shoes**. An identification **number** is tattooed on each man's wrist, which he shows each day to receive his daily rations.

Within a month, Levi adapts to his new hellish environment, learning the rules of the labor camp: everything will be stolen unless it is protected; hunger and pain are constant companions; don't think of the past or future, only of the present and its immediate needs. Although Levi was a chemist as a civilian, he is assigned to a manual labor unit, which is difficult for him due to his small stature. However, when a clumsy laborer drops a metal tool on his foot and gashes it open, Levi spends three weeks in the camp's infirmary, which is a welcome respite from the hard labor. The night after he rejoins the healthy prisoners, Levi dreams that he is with his sister and trying to tell her all that happened to him, but she is not interested in listening, which pains him greatly.

Since rations and resources are so meager, an underground economy thrives in the camp, functioning on the base unit of one ration of **bread**. The value of a bread ration compared to the various items that can be bought or sold—shirts, additional food, string, gloves, or anything useful for survival—fluctuates depending on supply and demand. Prisoners undertaking complex investment schemes, and their underground economy operates quite like a normal economy, except that every item is necessarily stolen or contraband. In light of this, when theft is a necessity for survival, Levi suggests to the reader that morality within the camp looks entirely different from morality in civil society.

Levi also describes how a prisoner's ability to "organize," or to procure additional resources or protections for oneself through the underground market or good relationships with camp officials, determines their chance of survival. The majority of prisoners simply accept what little food they are given and follow orders until their bodies fail them and they die of illness or exhaustion, usually within three months. Levi refers to these men as "the drowned," since their lives have been swallowed up by the lethality of the labor camp. However, for "the saved," those rarer few who quickly adapt to the camp and learn how to find extra resources or earn the goodwill and protection of powerful people, survival for several months or even years is possible. Though, everyone's fate still depends heavily on chance.

Three months into Levi's detention in the labor camp, word spreads that a Kommando, or working unit, of chemists will be established, and he decides to volunteer. Although Levi's chemical knowledge is tested by a German scientist and the man seems impressed, nothing comes of it for several more months and Levi still works in hard labor. In this same period, during the spring of 1944, the Russian air force begins bombing the Germans, often hitting Auschwitz and the neighboring camps, making life considerably more unpredictable and dangerous. However, during this time Levi also establishes a connection with an Italian civilian named Lorenzo who begins smuggling food and extra clothing to him, merely out of his own uncommon decency. For Levi, Lorenzo's gifts are more than mere additional resources, but a reminder that a world that is good and beautiful exists beyond the walls of the labor camp.

In October, the prisoners fear the coming winter since it means that most of them will die in the harsh coming months. The camp, which is now overcrowded with prisoners, will need to have its population quickly reduced so that everyone can fit indoors at night. One afternoon, the Germans have a "selection" in which they sort the 12,000 prisoners in the camp, sending thousands of them to be killed in the gas chambers at Birkenau, the neighboring death camp. The decision on who is killed and who is spared is arbitrary, made by an SS officer who glances at each man for less than a second and judges him fit to live or condemned to die. Levi survives, as does his best friend

Alberto, though many others they know are taken to be killed.

In November, as winter is setting in, it is announced one morning that three men have finally been selected to work indoors in the chemists' laboratory, one of whom is Levi. This is a great victory not only for Levi, but also for Alberto, since the two now share all of their resources and Levi will now have access to more items to steal and sell. Work in the laboratory is pleasant and warm, though for Levi, the strange familiarity and humanness of working at a desk with precise tools brings the painful realization that he has been reduced to nothing more than a beast of burden for all these months. There are beautiful young German women working in the laboratory as well—the first women any of the prisoners have seen in many months. The women are repulsed by the Jewish prisoners' smell and gaunt appearance, though, which only brings them additional pain.

Even so, with additional resources available and less strenuous, dangerous work, Levi grows stronger and he and Alberto become skilled organizers, running various investment and theft schemes to procure large amounts of food and better clothing. One day around Christmastime, while they are feeling victorious, they both see a Jewish prisoner who had participated in a violent rebellion in Birkenau executed for his crimes. As the man dies, Levi realizes with shame that the condemned was the last of the Jews with any strength to truly fight their oppressors. Despite he and Alberto's own success in organizing, they feel defeated and ashamed, realizing that the Germans have succeeded in crushing their spirits.

In January of 1945, Levi contracts scarlet fever and is quarantined in the infection ward of the infirmary for 40 days of isolation and rest. Within his first few days there, officials announce that the camp is being evacuated because the Russian army is nearly upon them. The prisoners who are healthy enough to walk will be marched away with the German guards, while those who are ill will be left to fend for themselves. Alberto joins the healthy prisoners and Germans, and "vanishes" into the night. Levi never sees him again, implying that he likely perished along the journey. Levi remains in the camp, weak with fever though stronger than most, with ten other ill men who share the same hut and hundreds of others left in the infirmary. With the help of two hard-working Frenchmen, Levi and most of the people in their hut survive the next te10n days, foraging for food, a woodstove, and fuel. The majority of the other men left in the camp die of starvation, illness, or exposure to the cold. After 10 days, the Russian army arrives and converts Auschwitz into a temporary hospital, caring for the survivors as best they can. Half of the people from Levi's group die in the Russians' care, though he and the Frenchmen survive. Levi and his collaborators return home, and he maintains a long and enduring friendship with one of them.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Primo Levi – Primo Levi is the main character of the story and author the memoir. The story takes place when Levi, an Italian Jewish man, is 24 years old. He is arrested by Italy's Fascist government and handed over to the SS, who take him to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. While of the Jewish people that Levi arrives with are immediately put to death, he and a selection of healthy men are instead put to slave labor in a camp of 10,000 Jewish prisoners. Levi is slight of stature, which causes him difficulty in the hard labor of the camp, but he possesses an uncommonly insightful and analytical mind, allowing him to make striking observations all the way through his narration of the horrors that he experiences. Although most prisoners die within their first three months, through a mixture of good fortune and shrewd organization, Levi manages to survive for over a year until the Russian army arrives and liberates what is left of the labor camp. Although he survives while so many of his comrades die, Levi constantly struggles to resist the dehumanization thrust upon him by the camp and its German operators. Levi's struggle to remain human remains a dominant theme throughout the story, describing both the pain of slowly losing one's humanity in the struggle to survive, as well as the pain of regaining it and realizing how brutishly one has lived for so many months. Along with Levi's struggle to survive and remain human, he is plagued by a fear that the story of what was done to the Jewish people in Auschwitz will never be heard, which propels him to eventually write *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Alberto – Alberto is an Italian Jewish man and Levi's best friend. Alberto arrives at Auschwitz in the same convoy as Levi and the pair spend as much time as they can together, working in the same Kommando, living in the same hut, and sharing all of the additional resources they are able to acquire equally between themselves. Alberto is cunning and knows which camp supervisors to befriend and which to avoid, making him well-suited to surviving in the camp. Although he does not play a particularly large role in the story, Alberto is often present and clearly provides a critical support to Levi throughout their shared year in Auschwitz. Alberto survives until the Germans evacuate Auschwitz, fleeing the Russian military's approach. Since Levi is sick with scarlet fever, Alberto is forced to march without him, leaving him to fend for himself in the camp. This turns out to be fortuitous for Levi, however, since everyone, including Alberto, who marches out of the camp with the German guards "vanishes," implying that they died on the journey.

Lorenzo – Lorenzo is an Italian citizen who smuggles food and clothing to Levi at Auschwitz each day. Although such contact is illegal and strictly punished, Lorenzo risks helping Levi anyway

out of simple compassion, receiving no pay or benefit from the arrangement. Lorenzo never appears directly in the narrative and Levi does not even describe how they meet, but he credits Lorenzo with his own survival. However, it is not Lorenzo's material gifts that save Levi. It is simply his acts of kindness which prove to Levi that somewhere in the world, goodness still exists that is worth living for, rather than giving oneself up to be destroyed by the barbarity of Auschwitz. Levi never reveals what comes of Lorenzo after the Germans flee and the Russians evacuate, though as an Italian non-Jewish citizen, it seems likely that he survives.

Null Achtzehn – Null Achtzehn is a young Jewish man who works briefly with Levi at Auschwitz until he drops a large piece of metal on Levi's foot, seriously injuring him. Null Achtzehn has ceased to be a human being—unable to even think enough to know when he is about to collapse from exhaustion—and is referred to only by his **tattooed number**, even by his fellow Jewish people. Null Achtzehn thus represents the furthest extent to which a person can be dehumanized by the camp and by the Germans, and still remain alive, able to work but no longer to think. In a sense, Null Achtzehn is already dead, his mind having been destroyed by the Nazis.

Kraus – Kraus is a young Hungarian Jewish man who briefly works alongside Levi at Auschwitz. Although Levi can see that Kraus must be an excellent civilian since he is earnest, hard-working, and honest, Levi knows that these qualities mean he will not survive long in the camp. This demonstrates the manner in which the moral and practical norms of outside life are inverted in the camp, since those who are good and deserve to live seemed destined to perish.

Henri – Henri is a young, frighteningly astute Jewish man who survives Auschwitz by learning how to manipulate various people, eliciting their compassion and making them believe he is their most genuine friend. Levi describes Henri to demonstrate how one may survive the horrors of the camp through cunning and manipulation, though Henri is so skilled at this that Levi finds it deeply unnerving. Although Levi knows that Henri survived the Holocaust, he remarks that he never wants to see him again.

Alfred L. – Alfred L. is an older Jewish man, who, though thin and weak-looking, manages to survive and set himself apart from his comrades at Auschwitz by keeping himself as groomed and proper-looking as it is possible to be in a labor camp. By putting on the appearance of importance, power, and dignity, Alfred L. is eventually promoted to a position of authority amongst the Jewish prisoners, increasing his chance of survival. Levi describes Alfred L.'s method of survival to demonstrate the importance of appearances, even in such a place as the camp.

Schepschel – Schepschel is a Jewish man who survives Auschwitz by demeaning himself for others' amusement—and their reward—and betraying his comrades to gain favor in the eyes of his Kapo. Levi describes Schepschel's method of survival to demonstrate how some prisoners live by debasing themselves and letting go of all dignity or pride.

Elias Lindzin – Elias Lindzin is a Jewish man who is short, stout, powerful, and potentially insane. Seemingly untiring and several times stronger than most of his fellow prisoners at Auschwitz, Elias's strength distinguishes him from his peers. Added to this is his unstoppable humor, which motivates him to constantly yells, dances, or makes incomprehensible but grandiose-sounding speeches. Levi describes Elias's to demonstrate how those least-suited to polite society may find they thrive in the environment of the camp. Against all the odds, Levi observes, Elias even seems happy.

Resnyk – Resnyk is a large Polish Jewish man who shares a bunk with Levi at Auschwitz and works for a time in the same Kommando. Although most prisoners, including Levi, occupy themselves with lessening their own suffering, Resnyk shows an uncommon kindness and decency. When Levi asks Resnyk to be his working partner, Resnyk graciously accepts even though Levi is small and weak. As they carry heavy loads, Resnyk shoulders most of the weight so that Levi will not be overcome with fatigue. Like Lorenzo, Resnyk provides an uncommon example of human goodness within the mire of the camp. In his maintained humanity, he is a foil to Null Achtzehn.

Alex – Alex is a German prisoner, a "professional delinquent" who is placed in charge of the Chemical Kommando at Auschwitz, though he himself is not a chemist nor particularly intelligent. Alex proves to be a coward, ruthless towards his Jewish underlings but fearful of any German or civilian who outranks him. Although Alex is made a Kapo over intelligent, well-educated Jews simply because he is German—and thus superior in the view of the Nazi ideology—he is clearly their subordinate, thereby contradicting that German notion of a racial hierarchy which dictates that any German person is naturally superior to any Jewish person, regardless of intelligence or ability. Regardless of how useless and ignorant Alex is, Levi refuses to base his view of Germans or even German prisoners on such a poor specimen as him, assuming that better examples must certainly exist somewhere.

Jean Levi – Jean is a young Jewish man and member of the Chemical Kommando at Auschwitz alongside . Jean is an assistant to Alex and works diligently to keep Alex from following through on his worst urges, sparing his fellow Jews. Levi and Jean become friends. One day, though they both speak French, Levi spends an hour trying to teach Jean Italian by reciting the Canto of Ulysses from Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Jean recognizes that the mental effort does Levi good and seems to bolster his sense of humanity, and so engages with the lesson enthusiastically. Although Levi never indicates what happens to Jean, he feels a deep sense of urgency to make Jean understand Italian, since the next day either one of them could be dead.

Doktor Pannwitz – Doktor Pannwitz is a German administrator at Auschwitz who tests Levi on his knowledge of chemistry so that he might work as a chemist in the camp's laboratory. Although Levi speaks well and is clearly intelligent, he senses that Pannwitz views him as something far less than human, a specimen that one sees through a glass cage. Levi does not hate him for this, but wishes he could understand what is in Pannwitz's mind, for then he could explain "the insanity of the third Germany."

Sómogyi – Sómogyi is a Jewish prisoner who dies in the infection ward on the day before the Russians arrive in Auschwitz. When Levi sees his emaciated corpse lying crumpled on the ground in the morning, he refers to him as "the Sómogyi thing," suggesting that he does not even appear human anymore.

Arthur – Arthur is a Frenchman whom Levi meets in the infection ward in the ten days between the Germans' evacuation of Auschwitz and the Russians' arrival. Arthur helps Levi and Charles to care for those in their hut too sick to get out of bed, helping to forage and cooking food for everyone. Alfred survives the war and is able to return home after the Russians liberate Auschwitz.

Charles – Charles is a Frenchman whom Levi meets in the infection ward in the 10 days between the Germans' evacuation of Auschwitz and the Russians' arrival. Charles is the healthiest and strongest in the hut, and plays a critical role in helping Levi to forage for food and supplies and survive. More importantly, Levi and Charles strike up a strong friendship, and Levi remarks that speaking with Charles helps him to feel more human again. Charles survives the war and returns home, and he and Levi maintain a long correspondence via letters.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Steinlauf – An older Jewish prisoner at Auschwitz who chastises Levi for not washing himself daily. Like Alfred L., Steinlauf believes that preserving one's body and hygiene is one of the few ways in which a prisoner can retain his sense of humanity and dignity.

TERMS

Lager – Short for *Arbeitslager*, which is German for "labor camp," Lager is the name the Jewish prisoners in the book most often use to describe Auschwitz. More than simply describing the physical location, the term Lager also embodies the dehumanization and cruelty wrought upon the Jewish prisoners by the Germans in the camp. When, after the Germans have fled, the remaining prisoners begin sharing food like human beings (which never happened while the labor camp was active), **Levi** remarks that that it signifies that the Lager is dead.

Kapo – A Kapo is a prisoner who has been placed in a position of authority over other prisoners, most often as the leader of a Kommando. Kapos may be Jewish or non-Jewish prisoners, but in either case receive special benefits and favorable treatment from the guards.

Kommando – German for "unit," a Kommando is a working group of slaves who labor for the Lager, led by a Kapo. Most Kommandos have 100 to 200 men in them, but the chemical Kommando only has 15.

Häftling – German for "prisoner," Häftling and the plural Häftlinge refer primarily to Jewish prisoners, though occasionally refer to non-Jewish prisoners as well. The name Häftling not only declares one's imprisonment in the Lager, however, but signifies how their former identity as an individual has been overridden by their status as a prisoner. As **Levi** gradually regains his humanity, he describes transitioning from Häftling back to a human being again.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DEHUMANIZATION AND RESISTANCE

During World War II, Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish man, narrowly escapes death in a crematorium when he is assigned to be a laborer in the hellish Lager (camp) of Auschwitz in Poland, where he survives for more than a year. His astute recollection of that experience provides a wealth of insight into the Holocaust, one of modern history's greatest evils, examining the suffering and survival of such horror with a surprising level of self-awareness. Among his most keen observations, Levi's account of Auschwitz demonstrates that, more than the day-to-day suffering, the Jewish prisoners' greatest struggle is to remain human in the face of their captors' constant efforts to dehumanize them.

Although the Levi and his fellow prisoners have narrowly avoided Auschwitz's death camps—so that their captors can use them as slave labor—the Nazis take every opportunity to dehumanize them in an attempt to destroy their sense of identity and humanity. For instance, when Levi, who has not had anything to drink for several days, finds himself an icicle to drink from, a German guard immediately takes the icicle and throws it away. Levi asks why, since the icicle obviously did not belong to anybody, to which the guard replies, "There is no why here," suggesting that the suffering of Jewish people and denial of basic needs is an end in itself. Levi realizes that "in this place

everything is forbidden, not for hidden reasons, but because the camp has been created for that purpose." The Jewish prisoners are given **numbered tattoos**, which come to replace their names except among close friends and describe the only information that is relevant to their life in the camps: their nationality and the period when they arrived at Auschwitz. In his first few weeks, Levi instinctively looks to his wrist to check the time on his watch—confiscated when he entered the camp—which he sees as a mark of a civilized man. However, in its place he only finds his tattooed number, a reminder that he is only one meaningless cog in a "great machine [meant] to reduce us to beasts." Levi observes that the hellish treatment and hard labor even eliminates many of the prisoners' basic survival instincts. He watches as a young man literally works himself to death, his body failing; "He has not even the rudimentary astuteness of a draught-horse, which stops pulling a little before it reaches exhaustion." The young man's inability to even recognize that he needs rest suggests that the Nazis have successfully stripped him of his basic humanity, making him less astute than even a beast of labor.

Since the Jewish prisoners are largely powerless to resist or fight their physical captivity, resisting their own dehumanization becomes a chief form of opposition to the Nazi's cruelty and ideology. When Levi, like many others, starts to neglect his own personal hygiene, reasoning that washing his face with filthy water in a filthy camp is pointless, he is severely chastised by an older prisoner named Steinlauf. Steinlauf argues that precisely because the Nazis want to dehumanize them, they must resist and "save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization," which can be done most practically by washing one's face and shirt each day and shining one's **shoes**, regardless of the fact that they will soon be dirty again. This suggests that, faced with a dehumanizing environment, holding onto whatever symbols and rituals of the civilized world one can is vital to maintaining one's own humanity. Although they are slaves, powerless and subject to every cruel whim of the Nazis, they still have the power to "refuse [their] consent," to resist the dehumanization thrust upon them and so confound their captors' aims. Thus, the daily rituals to remember one's own humanity not only save oneself, but also thwart the goals and ideology of their oppressors, giving a small amount of fighting power to otherwise powerless prisoners.

As liberation draws nearer, the survivors of Auschwitz slowly regain their sense of humanity, proving that the Nazis failed in their attempt to completely eradicate Jewish presence, identity, and dignity. After Levi is transferred from working as a hard laborer in the snow to working as chemist in a laboratory, the act of working indoors with fine tools, using his mind rather than his body, and working around young German women slowly returns his sense of civilization and humanity. However, with this return brings painful shame at realizing how "repugnant" and pitiable he appears, and how brutishly he has lived all these months as a prisoner. This demonstrates that Levi has not been sufficiently dehumanized by the Nazis to forget who he is, though the process of becoming human again is painful. When the Germans and the healthy prisoners leave the camp, fleeing the approaching Russian army, Levi is left behind with the ill prisoners to fend for themselves. In the absence of their German oppressors Levi and his fellows begin caring not only for themselves, but for others by gathering and sharing food, an action that was unthinkable while they were surviving under Nazi oppression. Levi calls this "the first human gesture that occurred among us," saying that it "really meant the Lager was dead." Despite the Nazis' aim of so brutalizing the Jewish prisoners that they lose all sense of humanity (an existential death, rather than a physical one), the prisoners' acts of altruism prove that they failed in their quest.

Although many died in Auschwitz, Levi's account proves that, despite the Germans' attempts to dehumanize them and wipe out their sense of identity, the Jewish prisoners ultimately manage to resist and hold onto their humanity. In light of their environment and the Nazi ideology, this endurance and maintenance of their humanity represents its own form of resistance.

ADAPTABILITY, CHANCE, AND SURVIVAL

In Auschwitz, the margin between survival and death is extremely thin. The author, Levi, only manages to survive through a combination of shrewd thinking and good fortune. This precarious mix of chance and skill suggests that one's meager chances of survival are dictated largely by their ability to be resourceful and adapt to the new hellish environment they find themselves in, although even the most resourceful individual can be struck down by poor luck.

The conditions of Auschwitz are set so that its prisoners will naturally die in high numbers, meaning that any prisoner who does not learn to adapt and develop new resources will die within months. Since new prisoners are constantly arriving and the Lager can only hold so many, it suits the Germans that their Jewish subjects perish frequently to make room for new arrivals. Thus, the Jewish prisoners are only given a bit of watery soup and small pieces of **bread** to eat each day—hardly enough for a person to live on even if they weren't subjected to brutal forced labor. Despite the frigid winters of Poland, the prisoners must march and work outside wearing only a thin shirt or a ragged jacket. Predictably, the majority of prisoners die within their first three months. Even if one is able to withstand the physical hardships, the very appearance of weakness is dangerous, since it makes one a prime target for the "selection": the annual culling of weak prisoners to be sent to the neighboring death camp to make room for new arrivals. Thus, to survive, a prisoner must not only protect their own

physical condition, but also defend their reputation and appearance as someone strong and healthy enough to be continually useful as a laborer. With such lethal conditions, death is nearly unavoidable as the most likely outcome for any Jewish prisoner who enters Auschwitz, thus suggesting that one can only survive through extraordinary measures.

Levi argues that the ability to adapt is not only critical to survival but distinguishes the Jewish prisoners into two groups, depicting how one group endures while the other dies. Although the most common response by prisoners is to keep one's head down and do as they're told, Levi describes such men as "the drowned," indicating the manner in which they will be swallowed by the lethality of the camp. "To sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp." Such men, Levi remarks, are "overcome before they can adapt themselves" by making advantageous relationships, learning how to acquire extra food, or learning enough German to avoid the anger of camp guards. This suggests that to simply try to endure the Lager is to invite one's own death. By contrast, Levi refers to those who quickly learn the new rules of the Lager and adapt to the harsh environment as "the saved" individuals who manage to scheme or manipulate their way into the good graces of the camp commanders, and thus live on extra rations and avoid the most dangerous work. This is exemplified by the oldest prisoners in the camp who have managed to survive for several years—an extremely small number of people—not one of whom did so by living as a normal prisoner or "subsisting on a normal ration," but who quickly established themselves as essential camp doctors, tailors, or overseers by "organizing" advantageous relationships with the Germans. The disparity between "the saved" and "the drowned" demonstrates that the small number of people who manage to survive Auschwitz for any length of time are those who possess a greater-than-average level of resourcefulness and resilience, suggesting that in such an environment, such adaptability is key to survival.

Even for the most adaptable individual, however, life in Auschwitz is so severe and unpredictable that luck and chance play nearly as significant a role as one's adaptability. Despite all the cunning of "the saved," the cruelty of the Germans and the extremely narrow margin between survival and death mean that often a simple accident, an unfortunate selection for a dangerous work assignment, or a harsh word can be a death sentence even for the most resourceful prisoner. Nowhere is the role of chance more apparent than in the annual selections of prisoners to be sent to the death camps. Although the selections are made based on each prisoner's appearance of health or usefulness, the Germans process such a large number of prisoners that they make each decision on whom to condemn and whom to save in less than a second, with only a glance at each man. When the choosing of Auschwitz laborers from the new arrivals takes too long, the Germans begin sorting based only on which side of the train carriage each man exits from, arbitrarily sending one half to their death and the other to labor. The banality of the selections and the unpredictability of being condemned or spared suggests that, as important as adaptability and resourcefulness are to survival in Auschwitz, in such a lethal environment, everyone is ultimately at the mercy of luck and chance.

Levi's extraordinary survival in the Auschwitz labor camp is a harrowing combination of resourcefulness, adaptability, and chance, demonstrating just how narrow the margin between life and death is for him and his fellow Jewish prisoners.

MORAL RELATIVITY

Levi, the author and a former prisoner at Auschwitz labor camp, describes himself doing things to survive which may have seemed unconscionable to him in his former civilian life. However, the cruelty of life in Auschwitz and the relentless demands of survival make actions that may have seemed morally reprehensible in the outside world commonplace in the Lager, suggesting that morality is relative, defined by circumstances rather than universal dictates.

The Jewish prisoners in the Lager are ordinary men, initially accustomed to the morality of civilized society, setting the basis from which their morality will be reshaped. Although there are non-Jewish political prisoners in Auschwitz as well—who live quite different and often separated lives in the Lager—the Jewish prisoners are mostly everyday people: businessman, tradesmen, rabbis, and family men. As such, when they enter the camp, their moral compass is aligned with general society's. Actions such as theft, betrayal, manipulation, or deceit seem immoral, since they were condemnable in regular society. This pre-existing sense of morality seems to be amplified by the Jews' religious heritage. Although Levi himself does not speak Yiddish or participate much in Jewish culture, many of his fellow inmates are rabbis and religious teachers who keep their minds sharp by discussing the scriptures. This suggests that in their lives before Auschwitz, they would have been involved not only in the teaching of scripture but of the Ten Commandments and religious ethics. The general morality of the prisoners before their lives in Auschwitz, based on the dictates of their religion and the guiding principles of society, establishes the baseline from which Levi will describe their gradual moral deviation. The Jewish prisoners of the Lager are not hardened criminals, but good, ordinary men, which makes their moral development all the more significant.

Due to the life-and-death demands of hunger and self-preservation, actions that once seemed unconscionable or unjustifiable become commonplace in the prisoners' lives, demonstrating how morality is defined by one's circumstances, rather than by permanent rules. The constant scarcity of

resources makes theft among prisoners entirely commonplace, an accepted practice of the Lager. Levi remarks, "If I find a spoon lying around, a piece of string, a button which I can acquire without danger of punishment, I pocket them and consider them mine by full right." This suggests that beyond theft being merely understandable, in the life of the Lager, an action that once seemed immoral now seems entirely ethical: "Theft in camp, repressed by the SS, is considered by the civilians as a normal exchange operation." This is reinforced by the fact that prisoners are careful never to set their few possessions down, but carry them everywhere, recognizing that to set an item down is to sacrifice it to reasonable theft. The Kapos—the prisoners who have been made overseers of the Kommandos, groups of prison laborers—inevitably beat their workers, since that is their job. While some do so malevolently, Levi describes how many beat their subjects "almost lovingly, accompanying the blows with exhortations, as cart-drivers do with willing horses," knowing that the external pain will help to distract the laborers from their own fatigue and help them push through the day's work. This suggests that even physical abuse, in specific circumstances, can go from a morally detestable action to an oddly benevolent one, complicating the notion of morality as a fixed system.

Recognizing the fact that what seems unconscionable in general society seemed commonplace and justifiable in camp, Levi challenges the reader to "contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words 'good' and 'evil,' 'just' and 'unjust,'" and to consider "how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire." The adjusted morality of the camp and Levi's open challenge to the reader strongly argue that morality is relative, defined by one's circumstances rather than any universal set of dictates or rules. Curiously, Levi even seems to extend this circumstantial morality to his captors, which, while not excusing them for their participation in a great evil, does help himself and the reader to understand how such events happen. Levi's entire account of Auschwitz is a testament to the cruelty and evil of the Third Reich. Even so, he observes that such evils seem to not be the will of each individual German, but the sweep of their culture and their period in history. Levi observes, "They build, they fight, they command, they organize and they kill. What else could they do? They are Germans. This way of behavior is not meditated and deliberate, but follows from their nature and from the destiny they have chosen." Although Levi makes no attempt to absolve them of their guilt, he does suggest that, just as the prisoners' morality has been distorted by the Lager, so too the individual Germans' sense of morality has been warped by the events surrounding them. Though it does not negate the evil, Levi's observations of circumstantial morality do help to explain how an entire nation could be caught up in such a momentous evil.

Watching a newly-arrived young man who maintains his old morality, Levi remarks, "What a good boy [he] must have been as a civilian; he will not survive very long here." Being morally good, then, is inverted as a negative trait within the ruthless context of the Lager. Auschwitz's brutal environment forces the prisoners to reorient their sense of morality in order to survive, thus arguing that morality itself is relative to one's circumstances.

RACIAL HIERARCHY

The Holocaust was motivated, among other things, by the belief that ethnic Germans were a master race, destined to wipe out all inferior races and create a superior breed of human beings. Although the Third Reich and its crusade to wipe out the Jewish people is founded on the belief of a racial hierarchy, Levi, the author and a prisoner at Auschwitz labor camp, observes the various ethnic groups within the camp and comes to the conclusion that although each has its distinctive characteristics, no such hierarchy of value truly exists.

The camp administrators go out of their way to assert their own superiority and the inferiority of the Jews, demonstrating their own convictions that the German race is superior in every way. Within Auschwitz, any individual who is a not Jewish, regardless of whether they are a prisoner, Kapo, or camp administrator, is considered to be inherently more valuable than any Jewish person. Levi observes, "[The Jewish people] are the slaves of the slaves, whom all can give orders to," even if they are other non-Jewish prisoners. This is a blatant assertion of the Germans' belief that the Jewish people are the lowest, most inferior group on earth. On the other end of the spectrum, regardless of how inept or stupid a man may be, any "Aryan" (the Reich's name for the supposed "master race") is given at least some position of authority within the camp—even if he is a political prisoner. This demonstrates the German belief in a rigid racial hierarchy that transcends individual merit. Supported by the inherently racist structure of the Lager, the camp administrators often deride the Jewish prisoners as weak, sub-human, and dirty, ignoring the fact that it was their own cruel treatment that made the prisoners so. In this way, the German belief in their own racial superiority becomes self-fulfilling: they see it modeled in the fact that they are mostly healthy and powerful, while their Jewish subjects are weak, dirty, and powerless, thus justifying further grotesque treatment in the minds of the Germans.

Rather than arguing that all people are essentially the same, Levi recognizes distinctions between the varying ethnic backgrounds of the prisoners, suggesting that there are, indeed, some characteristic differences between ethnic groups. The Greek Jewish people, who have been in the camp longer than most, are known to be "pitiless opponents in the struggle for life" and so "tenacious, thieving, wise, ferocious and united" that even the Germans respect them; contrarily, the Italian

Jewish people are widely believed—even by Levi—to be well-educated and well-suited to the outside world, but poor at surviving the camps or adapting themselves to its manual labor and harsh living. The non-Jewish Poles are regarded as hardy and powerfully-built, apt for surviving the camps and enduring hardship, suggesting that there are, to a degree, distinctions between ethnic groups. However, although Levi makes such observations, he never imposes them as a measure of value, nor does he assume that such descriptors must automatically apply to every individual or apply a racial hierarchy as the Germans do.

The widely varying quality and utility of individuals of all races ultimately denies that any hierarchy of value can truly exist between them. The obvious error of the Germans' racial hierarchy is most apparent when Levi and several other intelligent, well-educated Jews are assigned to the Chemical Kommando, a unit of Jewish prisoners intended to work as chemists. Although it is a technical unit and the prisoners expect that their Kapo will himself be a chemist, they are instead placed under the command of Alex, a German "professional delinquent" of limited stature and intelligence. Despite the German insistence that any Aryan is superior to any Jew, the brash idiocy of Alex compared with the intelligence of his Jewish underlings powerfully contradicts that belief, suggesting instead that there is no truth at all to the German's racial hierarchy. Rather than commit the same error as the Germans and believe that all members of another race are inherently evil or cruel, Levi and his fellow Jewish prisoners recognize that loathsome Germans such as Alex must be exceptionally rare. Levi recalls that they "refuse to believe that the squalid human specimens whom we saw at work were an average example, not of Germans in general, but even of German prisoners in particular." It is telling that the Jewish prisoners recognize such a concept as racial hierarchy to be so erroneous that, even though the only Germans they know are wretched and vile, they refuse to participate in it themselves, again firmly arguing that such a belief system that declares any race better or worse than another is entirely false.

Contrary to what the Germans believe about racial superiority or inferiority, Levi and his fellow Jewish prisoners observe that a racial hierarchy is inherently absurd and enables such dangerous and malevolent ideas as those that ultimately gave way to the Holocaust.

OPPRESSION, POWER, AND CRUELTY

As many thinkers have observed, power has the tendency to corrupt any individual, but Levi, the author and a former prisoner at Auschwitz labor camp, notes that this seems even more true when that individual has known what it is like to be powerless. At Auschwitz, some Jewish prisoners are promoted to the status of Kapos, who have authority over the other prisoners and receive special privileges. In his account, the relationships between the Jewish Kapos and their underlings demonstrates the effect that power and one's position in an oppressive relationship has on one's psyche, most often breeding cruelty and selfishness.

The Jewish Kapos, elevated to a position of power above their fellow Jewish prisoners, become more tyrannical than even the Germans, demonstrating the manner in which power corrupts and breeds cruelty. Although it would seem that accepting power granted by the Nazis over one's fellow Jewish prisoners would be an untenable betrayal, Levi notes that "there will certainly be someone who will accept," since "he will be withdrawn from the common law and will be untouchable," demonstrating how the enticement of power can lead people to join their oppressors and betray their own comrades and countrymen to alleviate their own suffering. However, the Jewish prisoners instinctively fear a Jewish Kapo, knowing that he will be as cruel as he possibly can be, since "if he is not sufficiently so, someone else, judged more suitable, will take over his post." This is underscored when Levi is relieved to be transferred to a non-Jewish Kapo's Kommando, since he knows that "he is not a Kapo who makes trouble, for he is not a Jew and so has no fear of losing his post." The tyranny of Jewish Kapos against their own brethren powerfully demonstrates how power can corrupt, especially when offered to one who was formerly powerless. Although the Jewish Kapos are hated by the other Jewish prisoners, Levi recognizes that some of their cruelty is also born of their own pain: "[The Kapo's] capacity for hatred, unfulfilled in the direction of the [Nazis], will double back, beyond all reason, on the oppressed; and he will only be satisfied when he has unloaded on to his underlings the injury received from above." This further suggests that such power is especially corrupting to those who have been denied power and justice in the past, making them even more cruel in an effort to compensate for their own pain.

Although the Jewish underlings have no power of their own, they, too, become most often cruel and selfish toward each other, suggesting that such great suffering fragments even the oppressed, rather than creating solidarity amongst them. Although, as Levi recognizes, there is an expectation that the oppressed will "unite, if not in resistance, at least in suffering," he does not witness this himself, stating instead that "a position of rivalry and hatred among the subjected has been brought about." Rather than binding together in a fight for their mutual survival, the Jewish prisoners "pursue [their] own ends by all possible means." This is particularly evident in the 10 days after the Germans have abandoned Auschwitz, leaving the sick and invalids to fend for themselves. Levi witnesses former prisoners eagerly waiting for their fellow inmates to die of illness so they might take their food without struggle. As much as the Jewish prisoners fear and detest their German captors, they seem to hate the Kapos just as much, since they have

betrayed their comrades and become cruel and violent to lessen their own suffering. However, as Levi recognizes, it seems that most would take such an opportunity given the chance, since their oppression has made them selfish and cruel for the sake of survival. This again suggests that such severe oppression fragments the sufferers, setting them against each other more than their oppressor, against whom they are powerless to contend.

The mutual ruin and fostering of cruelty in both the oppressor and the oppressed suggest that, as Levi observes, no one emerges uncorrupted or untouched from such a wicked, oppressive environment or the contest for power that it creates. Oppression and the imbalance of power, it seems, inevitably breed cruelty and selfishness.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TATTOOED NUMBER

The tattooed number printed on each prisoner's arm represents the replacement of their old identity as an individual with their new identity as Häftling, ultimately dehumanizing them. Every aspect of the camp is designed to dehumanize the Jewish prisoners and crush their spirits and their sense of individuality. In this vein, the tattooed number becomes each Jew's new identity, the only name which they are called by the Germans, and a permanent reminder that they do not even own their own bodies. By one's identifying number alone, a German official or an astute prisoner can know everything about a man that is relevant to their role as a prisoner: their nationality, when they arrived in the camp, and how long they have managed to survive. The tattooed number's symbolism of the replacement of human identity is most poignant when Levi, newly tattooed, habitually looks to where his wristwatch—representing a civilized and sophisticated life—should be on his arm, but instead only finds the tattooed numbers in its place. This is a painful reminder that in the eyes of the Lager, he is no longer a civilized man, a sophisticated professional. He is only a Häftling.

BREAD

As the only possession technically allowed to the prisoners, bread represents a prisoner's wealth, value, and wellbeing. In the illicit exchange market, bread functions as the base unit of value, measured in single rations. Thus, a prisoner who is a skilled organizer or investor will have a surplus of bread, while a prisoner who is not will only possess his single ration for as long as he can resist the temptation to eat it. Although it is a unit of wealth, bread is also the prisoner's primary mode of sustenance, the only substantive food the prisoners are ever fed, along with a watery bowl of soup. The rations of bread are never enough to sate one's hunger, meaning that if a prisoner is not enterprising enough to gather additional bread and thus wealth, they must choose between buying clothing or tools with their bread to better resist the cold, or eating it and briefly forgetting their hunger. Thus, the amount of bread that a prisoner possesses directly reflects his own wealth, and thus his wellbeing, since a surplus of such wealth automatically means a surplus of food as well, keeping one further from starvation than their comrades. When, at the end of the story, the surviving prisoners of the infection ward elect to reward Levi, Arthur, and Charles's foraging with portions of their own ration of bread, their act of budding humanity is made even more poignant by the fact that they are not only offering something of value, but risking their own wellbeing to show their appreciation.

SHOES

Shoes function as a minor symbol of one's status in the camp's social hierarchy. Jewish prisoners are only allowed wooden shoes, which are painful and cause dangerous sores that can lead to lethal infections. This reflects both the prisoners' low station and the general disregard with which the Germans treat them. Contrarily, German officials and even German prisoners are given leather shoes, which are far more comfortable and less likely to cause dangerous infections. Near the end of the story, as the Russian army is approaching and Alberto is about to leave the camp and and take his first steps—he believes—towards his liberation, he acquires for himself a pair of leather shoes. These shoes symbolize his rising position within the hierarchy of the camp, since he will become a free man and the German officials will become the new prisoners.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Survival in Auschwitz* published in 1996.

Chapter 1. The Journey Quotes

❝ But on the morning of the 21st we learned that on the following day the Jews would be leaving. All the Jews, without exception. Even the children, even the old, even the ill [...] For every person missing at the roll-call, ten would be shot.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

After Levi is arrested by Italian Fascists and placed in a detention camp, SS officers arrive and announce that all 650 Jews will be taken away the next morning. Although this is the Italian Jews' first interaction with the SS or German soldiers, the threat to execute ten people for each person who tries to escape immediately clarifies the relationship. Although Levi previously thought he would be safer as a Jew than as a political dissident, this is clearly untrue. Particularly horrifying is the inclusion of children in the transport and the threat of violence. The SS officers seem to have no regard whatsoever for the innocence or naivety of childhood, and they happily subject the young children to the same threat of death as their parents. Although, through history, the Nazis' killing of Jewish children is a well-known fact, the callous and indifferent nature of it underscores just how much the Nazi ideology dehumanized the Jews in the eyes of the Germans. In their minds, they are not dealing with human beings, and thus human children, but something inferior and without value.

❝ Here we received the first blows; and it was so new and senseless that we felt no pain, neither in body nor in spirit. Only a profound amazement: how can one hit a man without anger?

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

As Levi and the other Jewish prisoners are being loaded onto the train for transport to Auschwitz, the SS officers indifferently beat them, either to prevent them from moving or out of trained habit. Despite the suffering and horror that the Germans inflict upon the Jewish people throughout the story, very rarely do any of them make a show of anger. Rather, they all maintain a passive indifference, showing as much emotion as they would filing paperwork at the office or stacking bricks in the yard; it is a simple task, a day's work. This cold indifference to the suffering of human beings makes their violence all the more disturbing and once again reiterates how Nazi ideology has completely destroyed any notion that Jewish people are human beings just as Germans are. Although violence, torture, and evil would still be violence, torture, and evil if it was enacted out of anger or rage, it at least would be easier to understand, since most people are familiar with the feelings of anger or rage. However, the calculated cruelty of the Holocaust and all who participated in it remains one of its most chilling and confounding aspects, making it rather unique even among other genocidal ethnic cleansings of the 20th century.

Chapter 2. On the Bottom Quotes

❝ And for many days, while the habits of freedom still led me to look for the time on my wristwatch, my new name ironically appeared instead, a number tattooed in bluish characters under the skin.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols: #

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

After Levi is shaved bald and his possessions are taken from him, he is tattooed with the number 174517 on his wrist, which he must show each day to receive his daily rations. The numbered tattoo that each prisoner receives on their wrist symbolizes their new identity as a prisoner. Their old life has been taken from them and their captors—and many comrades—do not even refer to them by their names, but only by their numbers. Significantly, each man's number reveals the only things considered worth knowing in the camp: what nationality of Jew one is and how long they have lived in the camp. Such details as what one did in their prior life, what sort of character they possess, whether they have family or friends, all things that make up an individual person, have no value in the labor camp. In a very real sense, the numbered tattoo has stripped them of all prior identity, all marks of humanity, and given them the new title of prisoner, with an identifier to easily organize them. The fact that the number is tattooed means that even for those very few Jewish prisoners who survive and find liberation, such as Levi, both the number and the trauma of their experiences in the concentration camp will remain with them for the rest of their lives.

And it is this refrain that we hear repeated by everyone: you are not at him, this is not a sanatorium, the only exit is by way of the Chimney.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

When Levi asks a German guard for basic amenities in the camp, he receives this refrain as a reply. The Chimney obviously refers to the crematoriums in neighboring Birkenau, where even those who are put to labor and thus spared death for weeks or months will still end up. This refrain and the constant presence of the smoking chimney are a stark reminder that, although Levi and the others are used as laborers in the Buna, Auschwitz itself is still a death camp, designed for the mass extermination of Jewish people. This makes the labor camp even more dangerous, designed to kill prisoners in high numbers to make way for the new arrivals. Recognizing this, Levi's survival in the camp for over a year seems even more miraculous, since survival goes against the entire design and structure of the camp. Simply by surviving, Levi and the few others thwart the very design and purpose of Auschwitz, which, like resisting their dehumanization, constitutes its own private form of resistance against the Nazi ideology and the German campaign to utterly eradicate the Jewish people.

And do not think that shoes form a factor of secondary importance in the life of the Lager. Death begins with the shoes; for most of us, they show themselves to be instruments of torture, which after a few hours of marching cause painful sores which become fatally infected.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker), Alberto

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Levi recounts how the method for acquiring shoes is haphazard and random, but the consequences of good or bad shoes can be lethal. Shoes work as a minor symbol throughout the story, reflecting one's social position within the hierarchy of the camp as well as the life-or-death consequences of that social standing. Although German officials and many non-Jewish prisoners wear leather shoes, which flex comfortably and do not cause such wicked sores, leather shoes are forbidden to the Jews. Instead, they are only allowed painful wooden shoes, which fit poorly, cause sores which can easily lead to death, as mentioned in the quote. The inequality of shoes, which (perhaps intentionally) leads to a higher mortality rate amongst Jewish prisoners, reflects the manner in which an advantageous social position improves one's chances of survival. Significantly, the only time a Jewish person is seen wearing leather shoes in the story is when Alberto manages to find himself a pair as the camp is being evacuated before the approach of the Russian army. Although Alberto dies on the march, his wearing of leather shoes symbolizes the coming collapse of the Lager's hierarchy. So close to freedom, Alberto wears shoes as a free man would.

Chapter 3. Initiation Quotes

Precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place once can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker), Steinlauf

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

After a couple weeks in the Lager, Levi stops washing himself each day, since he can see no point to it. An older man named Steinlauf chastises him for this, arguing that the Jewish prisoners must resist the Germans' attempt to dehumanize them as a form of resistance. Steinlauf's observation is poignant, since every aspect of the Lager is designed either to kill a man immediately or preserve his body for labor but so demean him that it destroys his soul. Even if the Germans deign that they need a Jew man's body or skillset to labor, the dehumanization they attempt to inflict results in an existential death long before their physical body fails. In this way, the Germans destroy a Jewish prisoner, wiping him out of existence, even while he still has strength to march and carry loads. Steinlauf aptly observes that although the Jewish prisoners are largely powerless to resist their German oppressors, they can still

resist the ideology and attempt to dehumanize them by maintaining the trappings of civilization, by carrying themselves well and cleaning themselves each day. Moreover, it is important that some of them remain men and survive, so they can tell the world what happened in Auschwitz, just as Levi eventually manages to do.

Chapter 4. Ka-Be Quotes

In this discreet and composed manner, without display or anger, massacre moves through the huts of Ka-Be every day, touching here or there.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

During Levi's first stay in the Ka-Be infirmary, he describes how periodic selections are made to send ill prisoners to the crematoriums to be killed, assumedly to make room for more valuable prisoners in need of treatment. The "composed manner" in which prisoners are removed from Ka-Be and sent to their deaths each day typifies the cold, dispassionate murder present everywhere in the camp. Although the only Jews allowed to be treated in the infirmary at all are those considered "economically useful" due to some skillset or experience they possess—Levi, for example, is a trained chemist—even valued as such, death is always hovering nearby. This constant presence of death reinforces not only the horror of the camp but also the role of sheer luck in one's ability to survive. Despite all the struggling and hustling one may do, it is still just as likely they will be selected at random to clear space in the infirmary bunks.

We, transformed into slaves, have marched a hundred times backwards and forwards to our silent labours, killed in our spirit long before our anonymous death. No one must leave here and so carry to the world, together with the sign impressed on his skin, the evil tidings of what man's presumption made of man in Auschwitz.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

During his 20 days of bed rest in Ka-Be, Levi has time to painfully reflect on what each Jewish prisoner has become and the evil that has been wrought on them. Levi's reflection not only recognizes once again the German goal to so dehumanize the Jews that their spirit dies long before their body, but also recognizes that the Germans know that cannot let any prisoner live and escape to tell the world of what the Nazis are doing. This suggests that the Germans themselves, though they do their evil work dispassionately, recognize the utter wrongness, the incivility, perhaps even the evil of what their Nazi ideology has led them to do. In any case, the Germans know that the rest of the world will deem it as unconscionable. The German nation's ability to carry out such catastrophic evil even though they must know, on some level at least, the horrible gravity of trying to utterly eradicate an entire nation of people, was for Levi and still remains today the most incomprehensible aspect of the Holocaust.

Chapter 5. Our Nights Quotes

A day begins like every day, so long as not to allow us reasonably to conceive its end, so much cold, so much hunger, so much exhaustion separates us from it: so that it is better to concentrate one's attention on the block of grey bread, which is small but will certainly be ours in an hour, and which for five minutes, until we have devoured it, will form everything that the law of the place allows us to possess.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Levi describes the feeling of lying in bed before the morning alarm has sounded, contemplating the endless, horrifying stretch of day in front of him. Throughout the story, bread symbolizes value in a number of different ways, but all reflect the wealth and wellbeing of a prisoner. Since even their clothes belong to the camp, bread is the single thing that the prisoners are allowed to possess for themselves,

meaning that a man with bread is a man with wealth of a sort. Bread is the primary source of sustenance, delivered in too-small of quantities several times a day; without bread to eat, a prisoner will certainly die. However, bread also forms the basis of the underground economy, by which enterprising prisoners can acquire spoons, bowls, string to repair clothing, and so on. A prisoner who is shrewd can save some of his bread to invest in various schemes and thus even multiply his supply of food, though the temptation to simply eat all of one's bread and appease their hunger in the moment is powerful. In this way, a prisoner's supply and use of bread indicates their wealth, resourcefulness, self-control, and general wellbeing, all of which will greatly affect their chances of survival.

Chapter 7. A Good Day Quotes

❝ At least for a few hours, no quarrels arise, we feel good, the Kapo feels no urge to hit us, and we are able to think of our mothers and wives, which usually does not happen. For a few hours we can be unhappy in the manner of free men.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Levi describes what constitutes a good day in the camp: that they are able to see the sun shine, given a bit of extra soup, and assigned work that is not particularly arduous. However, what is most striking is that on such a good day, when Levi and his fellows are not feeling so dehumanized or beaten down that they have the chance to actually reflect on their state, they have a brief and coveted moment to actually feel pain for all those they have lost. In reading about the day to day misery of the Jewish prisoners, it is easy to forget that each of them has lost most of the people in the world whom they ever loved. Such emotional and psychological anguish only compounds the horror of their situation and the evil inflicted by the German nation in the Holocaust. Although it would be understandable if the prisoners sought desperately to avoid thinking of their loved ones' deaths, Levi suggests that most prisoners are in fact grateful for the chance, since to feel pain at great loss, to feel such overwhelming existential and personal sadness is a decidedly human thing to do. In an environment such as the concentration camps, where every rule and beating are designed to dehumanize its victims, feeling such human emotions may indeed seem like a welcome respite, an opportunity to deny their oppressors' dehumanizing work and feel fully and agonizingly human.

Chapter 8. This Side of Good and Evil Quotes

❝ We now invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words "good" and "evil", "just" and "unjust"; let everybody judge [...] how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Over the course of the chapter, Levi describes how theft and deceit are integral, accepted aspects of daily life in the Lager and essential to survive. In his conclusion, he challenges the reader to consider the meaning of traditional morality in such brutal conditions as the Lager provides. Levi's challenge to the reader is effectively his thesis statement on moral relativity, which is seen and described all throughout the story. Although many of the Jews in the camp came from overtly religious backgrounds with sophisticated and firm ethical systems, all of that seems to dissolve within the bounds and daily demands of the camp. This strongly suggests, then, that morality has to be relative to one's circumstances rather than dictated by universal rules. Such precepts as the Ten Commandments may serve one well in civil society, but observation of such strict and selfless rules in the camp would certainly lead one to a swift death. Although Levi never attempts to absolve himself or his fellow prisoners of their sometimes cruel-seeming behavior, he does argue in clear terms that in the Lager, where the margin between life and death is incredibly narrow, different rules and morals govern day-to-day life.

Chapter 9. The Drowned and the Saved Quotes

> We would also like to consider that the Lager was preeminently a gigantic biological and social experiment.
>
> Thousands of individuals, differing in age, condition, origin, language, culture and customs, are enclosed within barbed wire: they live a regular, controlled life which is identical to all and inadequate to all needs, and which is more rigorous than any experimenter could have set up to establish what is essential and what adventitious to the conduct of the human animal in the struggle for life.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Levi observes the psychological distinction between those who learn to survive in the Lager and those who quickly perish, noting that the brutality of their environment adds remarkably clarity to such a distinction. Levi's account of Auschwitz is distinct among Holocaust literature for its insightful observations of the psychology of all involved, and demonstrates his astute mind. For both Levi and for the Germans, though, the horrors of the concentration camp provide a distinctive set of conditions—a terrible lens through which to observe human behavior stretched to its worst limits. Throughout the story, Levi implies that this seems to be an intentional act, that the Germans purposefully organized the camps in such a way that they could not only profit from the slave labor, but also gain valuable insight and research into human behavior. This cold, analytical viewing of human beings as research specimens—though justifiable for Levi, since he was one of the suffering specimens himself—once again makes the German officials seem all the more terrifying for the degree to which they has ceased to view Jews as human beings, but rather animals in a grotesque zoo, to be studied and used.

> To sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp. Experience showed that only exceptionally could one survive more than three months this way.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

While Levi is analyzing the psychology of the prisoners in the camp, he argues that all prisoners fall into one of two groups: the drowned and the saved. The drowned, who "sink" below the lethal surface of the camp and are lost, are merely those ordinary men who do not quickly adapt to their new environment and learn how to hustle, steal, and trade for additional resources. Significantly, to become one of the drowned is simply to observe the status quo—all that a man has to do to join their ranks is eat the food given him and do the work given him and keep his head down. This once again demonstrates how the Germans engineer the conditions of the camp so that the Jewish prisoners will naturally die in their first few months; any who survive longer are an extreme anomaly or have learned the various methods of cheating death one day at a time. The easiness with which a man can sink also underscores the need for adaptability and resourcefulness if he is to have any odds of survival. But, as Levi goes on to argue, it is not necessarily shameful to drown or to sink. The majority of prisoners who enter the camp will do so, and it is only a rare and opportunistic few who manage to count themselves among the saved.

> That they were stolid and bestial is natural, when one thinks that the majority were ordinary criminals, chosen from among the German prisons for the very purpose of their employment as superintendents of the camps for Jews; and we maintain it was a very apt choice, because we refuse to believe that the squalid human specimens whom we saw at work were an average example, not of Germans in general, but even of German prisoners in particular.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Levi describes their German supervisors and Kapos—though not the camp administrators—many of whom were German prisoners relocated to the Polish camps to inflict their cruelty on the Jewish underlings. The placement of German prisoners over Jewish civilians once again demonstrates Germany's belief in a racial hierarchy, that the lowest German person is naturally superior to the greatest Jewish person. However, the squalid nature of

their overseers seems to naturally disprove this theory. It is admirable, then, that although the Germans take such a low, grotesquely-stereotyped view of Jewish people, the Jewish prisoners in turn refuse to commit the same injustice towards the Germans. Although the only Germans the Jewish prisoners have any contact with are brutish, stupid, distasteful specimens of human beings, the prisoners maintain that somewhere, a better example of German citizenry must exist. The Jewish prisoners' refusal to stereotype the Germans in the same way, though it almost seems justifiable, directly refutes the concept of any sort of racial hierarchy, even if it should elevate themselves and belittle their oppressors.

Chapter 10. Chemical Examination Quotes

❝ Because that look was not one between two men; and if I had known how completely to explain the nature of that look, which came as if across the glass window an aquarium between tow beings who live in different worlds, I would also have explained the essence of the great insanity of the third Germany.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker), Doktor Pannwitz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Levi is being tested by one of the German administrators, Doktor Pannwitz, about his knowledge and skill as a chemist. Although they are speaking about sophisticated subject matter, Levi cannot help but feel that he is not being seen as a human, but as something entirely other. Doktor Pannwitz's view of Levi typifies the Germans' dehumanization of the Jews. It is ironic that, although Levi is obviously quite intelligent—he proves thoroughly knowledgeable in his examination—Pannwitz still looks at him as if he is a fish in a bowl. This suggests then that Germany's debased view of the Jewish people has nothing to do with the perception of them being less intelligent, able, or sophisticated, but rather they are intrinsically less human and less valuable than Germans simply for the ethnic heritage they possess. The argument for German superiority seems to quickly and easily break down, and if anything, only highlights the absurdity of a belief in an Aryan master race.

❝ Without hatred and without sneering, Alex wipes his hand on my shoulder, both the palm and the back of the hand, to clean it; he would be amazed, the poor brute Alex, If someone told him that today, on the basis of this action, I judge him and Pannwitz and innumerable others like him, big and small, in Auschwitz and everywhere.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker), Doktor Pannwitz, Alex

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

After his chemistry examination with Doktor Pannwitz, Levi and his German Kapo, Alex, cross the camp back towards the worksite, and Alex wipes his greasy hand on Levi's shirt. Once again, Alex's casual, indifferent treatment of Levi as if he were a washrag highlights the degree to which the Germans have dehumanized the Jews in their own minds, which they then try to make a reality in the life of the camp. Although it is likely that Alex was not even entirely conscious of the action, it sticks in Levi's mind as a unique instance among all the horrors he sees during his year of imprisonment. This suggests that in such a situation of oppression and dehumanization, the effects of such ill treatment are magnified in the eyes of the oppressed. What seems to Alex, the oppressor, like an offhand action, a simple wipe of the hand, symbolizes all the injustice and dehumanization in Levi's mind. Such different perceptions of the same event highlight the obvious disparity between the two, not only in power, but in awareness of other people's human dignity.

Chapter 12. The Events of Summer Quotes

❝ More generally, experience had shown us many times the vanity of every conjecture; why worry oneself trying to read the into the future when no action, no word of ours could have the minimum influence?

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

When the chemical examination does not lead to any promotion or change of work for several months, Levi and

the other candidates are unsurprised. Levi's observation that the experienced prisoners no longer put any stock in the future or even try to plan for it makes sense, in the confines of the camp. They no longer see the use in wasting energy to think about the future when death may likely arrive at any moment. However, it tragically suggests that not only has life in the camp robbed them of every possession and attempted to rob them of their very humanity, it also robs the prisoners of their future. Planning for the future and hoping for certain outcomes is a very natural and human thing to do, and is yet another characteristic that separates human beings from most animals. For the prisoners, losing any perception of their future or their past leaves them in a vacuum of the present moment, which, since they live in a concentration camp, inevitably includes suffering. This serves as yet another example of the manner in which the camps compound suffering upon needless suffering, aiming to make the Jewish prisoners less and less like human beings with each passing day.

> At Buna the German Civilians raged with the fury of a secure man who wakes up from a long dream of domination and sees his own ruin and is unable to understand it.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

As the Russian army draws nearer and nearer to Auschwitz, everyone in the camps can hear the rumble of ground units and Russian planes begin bombing the region. The Germans' panic and "fury" at losing their position of domination suggests that they fear losing such dominance and finding themselves under the same yolk of oppression they have so ruthlessly inflicted upon the Jewish people. This fear condemns them, since it proves that the Germans understand just how painful and ruinous such oppression is. Such ruthless cruelty seemed permissible so long as it is pointed at someone else, but as soon as the possibility of it being redirected at themselves arises, such oppression seems woeful and terrible. To the Germans, receiving a proverbial taste of their own medicine seems more than they can bear, which should have indicated to them long before just how evil and despicable their campaign against the Jewish people has truly been. However, such a one-sided view of morality and justice seems to appear frequently throughout history whenever one people commits a massive injustice against another.

> I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker), Lorenzo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

In his later months in the camp, Levi meets an Italian citizen named Lorenzo who daily smuggles him extra food, a padded vest to fight off the winter cold, and whatever other helpful supplies he can acquire. Levi never pays Lorenzo for these gifts, since he has nothing to pay with, Lorenzo simply does it out of his own brave benevolence. Lorenzo thus plays a critical role in helping Levi to maintain not only his own humanity, but also the belief that beauty and goodness can still exist in the world. After half a year of seeing only the starved wretches of his fellow prisoners and the sordid cruelty of the Germans, it would indeed be difficult not to grow overwhelmingly cynical about the world and submit oneself to the idea that everything and everyone was either evil or a victim. Lorenzo's selfless, unmerited generosity—which is also a danger to himself, since any civilian caught aiding Jewish prisoners would himself become a prisoner of the camps—contradicts such a cynical notion by its very existence. Beyond the obvious benefit of providing sustenance, Lorenzo's kindness ultimately helps Levi to hang onto his own humanity and continue to fight the dehumanizing power of the Germans and their camps.

Chapter 13. October 1944 Quotes

> Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?
>
> If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

After a camp-wide selection of several thousand prisoners to be exterminated in the crematorium, a Jew named Kuhn sits in his bunk and loudly praises God for sparing him, tactlessly ignoring the fact that his bunkmate, lying next to him, was selected to be killed. Levi speaks very little of God throughout the story, though he does admit to having comparatively little engagement with Judaism—he speaks no Yiddish whatsoever, for example. However, his justified anger at Kuhn for believing in God's providence or protective power when everyone knows that the selections are horrifically random, suggests that Levi does not place any trust in God to protect or preserve him. When so many people in the camps are killed by mere chance, and when one's own survival means that another has died in their stead, it seems both absurd and grotesque to believe that God could providentially spare one person while condemning thousands of others to die. Although this is the only time Levi speaks cynically of God, his recognition that the selection is an "abomination" implies that God might bear some responsibility for allowing it, and certainly that human beings bear such responsibility. It is worth noting that Elie Wiesel, another Jew who wrote a memoir about his similar experience surviving the Holocaust, lost all faith in God due to the abominations he witnessed.

Chapter 14. Kraus Quotes

❝ What a good boy Kraus must have been as a civilian: he will not survive very long here, one can see it at first glance, it is as logical as a theorem.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker), Kraus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

Many months into Levi's internment in Auschwitz, when he is considered an "old hand" by most in the camp—since he has survived much longer than the majority of prisoners who arrive—he is put to work with a young man named Kraus who has recently arrived. Levi recounts his brief experience with Kraus to demonstrate how much life is inverted within the camps. Kraus is a good young man, well-meaning, hard-working, honest, and for precisely these reasons, Levi knows he will soon perish. Although Kraus would be a benefit to any company in the civilized world, in the camps, such naïve earnestness will inevitably get him killed. That such a good man as Kraus will certainly die implies that the only men who survive are those who learn to be ruthless and cunning rather than hard-working and diligent. This weeding out of the good men, who are out-lived by the shrewd, seems to be yet another manner of dehumanization that the Germans inflict upon the population of Jewish prisoners. If the best, most moral men among them are killed off, the population of surviving Jewish people will, by contrast, be far less moral, diligent, or honest. The calculated brutality of the camp ensures that, through a gross form of natural selection, the only Jewish people who might last more than a few months are not their finest citizens, but their most callous and cold-hearted survivors.

Chapter 15. Die drei Leute vom Labor Quotes

❝ They construct shelters and trenches, they repair the damage, they build, they fight, they command, they organize, they kill. What else could they do? They are Germans. This way of behavior is not meditated and deliberate, but follows from their nature and from the destiny they have chosen. They could not act different.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

As the Russians draw nearer, Levi reflects that the Germans operate their camps like machines and seem incapable of doing anything else, regardless of what obstacles or objections they face. Curiously, Levi seems to extend his argument about circumstantial morality—explored as it relates to theft in the camp—even to the Germans and their maintenance of Auschwitz. His argument that the Germans are merely acting out of their own nature and participating in the movement of their culture seems to absolve the individuals, to a small degree, from their participation in the horrors of the Holocaust. While it does not seem likely that Levi would regard any German camp official as guiltless, he shows an extraordinary level of understanding towards the German people who are simply caught up in the swell of a

cultural movement which drove them to commit heinous acts. Once again, this level of self-awareness and psychoanalytical observation of those who brutally oppress his people makes Levi's memoir stand out among the many pieces of Holocaust literature. Although it certainly does not absolve Germany of the great atrocity committed, it does offer the individual reader a hint of what may have driven the German people to such grotesque action.

❝ But in the morning, I hardly escape the raging wind and cross the doorstep of the laboratory when I find at my side the comrade of all my peaceful moments, of Ka-Be, of the rest-Sundays—the pain of remembering, the old ferocious suffering of feeling myself a man again, which attacks me life a dog the moment my conscience comes out of the gloom.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Levi has finally been promoted to working as a chemist in the camp's laboratory, which means that he no longer has to endure hard labor in the winter's cold. This moment of realization, that without comfort comes the painful opportunity to contemplate how bestial he has become, marks a milestone in Levi's gradual journey of becoming human once again. Although Levi is never utterly dehumanized by life in the camp, his humanity is certainly repressed, just as every other man's is, by the daily hardships he experiences. The shame and pain that Levi feels, the sadness that he cannot express, suggests that just as dehumanization and losing one's soul to suffering is a painful and violent process, so regaining one's soul and recognizing what he has become in the intervening months is similarly painful. Thus, assuming that one survives the trauma and violence of the concentration camps, the dehumanization inflicted by the Germans is a misery that must be endured at least twice and brings the shame of realizing that one can so easily lose, sacrifice, or repress one's humanity.

Chapter 16. The Last One Quotes

❝ At the foot of the gallows, the SS watch us pass with indifferent eyes: their work is finished, and well-finished. The Russians can come now: there are no longer any strong men among us, the last one is now hanging above our heads.

Related Characters: Primo Levi (speaker), Alberto

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Levi and Alberto, who have become skilled organizers and among the most respected prisoners of the camp, chance upon a Jewish rebel (who helped blow up a crematorium in Birkenau) being executed in the square. Although Levi and Alberto were feeling quite pleased with themselves and proud of their shrewd work, the man's sacrifice makes them realize with shame that for all their scheming, they are still powerless prisoners. Arguably, Levi and Alberto's very ability to thrive within the structure of the camp constitutes its own form of resistance to the Nazis' attempt to crush and destroy their spirits. However, such a quite manner of resistance obviously pales in comparison to the hanged man's true act of violent rebellion against their oppressors. That Levi and Alberto felt victorious in their ability to find extra food or better clothing indicates that, feel powerless as prisoners to actually fight their oppressors, the entire scope of their world has been reduced to their small portion of the camp. Beyond operating within the confines laid down by their German oppressors, Levi and Alberto are forced to face the fact that they have achieved nothing at all. They have allowed themselves to be debased and dehumanized without so much as a fight. Although the reader is inclined to be sympathetic to Levi and recognize the accomplishment of his survival, the author's own condemnation of himself suggests that he still carries the shame of being too weak to fight.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1. THE JOURNEY

Primo Levi, a 24-year-old Italian Jew, is captured by the Fascist Militia on behalf of the "new-born Fascist Republic," which he has been working against as a resistance organizer. Believing (mistakenly) that his political crimes will earn him a death sentence if discovered, Levi instead declares his status as an "Italian citizen of Jewish Race." On this admission, he is sent to a detention camp in Modena, Italy, where he waits for several weeks with other individuals arrested by the Fascists, hundreds of whom are Jewish, though there are foreigners and political prisoners as well. After several weeks, a unit of German SS officers arrive, inspect the camp, and declare that every single Jew will be moved to a new location. They should be ready the next morning "for a fortnight of travel. For every person missing at the roll call, ten would be shot."

Levi's assumption that he is endangered by his political crimes rather than his ethnic identity suggests that he did not truly perceive the threat that the German expansion was to Jews all over Europe. Although not discussed in the book, Germany has recently occupied central and northern Italy to liberate Mussolini—who was deposed by his own government—and install him as a puppet governor in support of the Third Reich. This explains the Germans' swift yet seemingly unsurprising arrival on the scene. Their threat over roll call immediately establishes them as brutally efficient and precise.

Most everyone understands what this journey must mean, as they have met other refugees who have already fled the German expansion. Although usually, when one is condemned to die, they are given a moment of respite and offered whatever comfort suits them, the night is chaotic and fretful as people pack, prepare, pray, or celebrate one last time. When preparations have been made, a group of people light candles and lament together. Levi recalls that is possessed by an ancient grief, though new to him, "the grief without hope of exodus that is renewed every century." The sun rises and the new day dawns, and the Jewish people await their fate in a "collective, uncontrolled panic."

The fact that the Germans do not allow the Jewish people even the time to hold ceremony or prepare themselves for death illustrates just how little regard they showed for the Jewish race in general, not even seeing them as human beings, since human beings are typically allowed (if nothing else) the chance to collect themselves and find comfort before being executed. The grief that is "renewed every century" suggests that as terrifying as this event is, it seems but the latest in a long history of oppressions.

The Germans count the 650 Jewish prisoners—reporting that all the "pieces" are present—and load them onto cargo trains, packed so tightly that there is hardly room to move one's arms. The Germans strike them at random as they climb aboard, though they feel no pain, only confusion at how someone could hurt another "without anger." They travel that way for days, suffering from hunger and thirst and the winter's cold as they pass through various Austrian towns. The cramped quarters make it nearly impossible to lie down. Although they are struck with despair, the physical pain and discomfort serves to distract them, and keep them from the abyss. Of the 45 people in his train car, only four will ever return home—the highest percentage of survivors of any of the train cars. Intuiting this, the Jewish people begin to say their farewells to whichever strangers are near.

Once again, the Germans do not view the Jewish prisoners as human beings but as assets, or "pieces." This seems to allow them to commit great acts of brutality and violence with a chilling nonchalance. As hinted at by the Jewish people's confusion, Levi will struggle throughout the story to comprehend how the Germans can undertake such violence and brutality in such a calm, disconnected manner. Levi's observation that only four people in his section of the train will live through what they are about to endure foreshadows the prevalent death and hardships he will soon face, and establishes his story as one of rare survival.

The train arrives at its destination and the Jewish prisoners spill out into the cold night. German officers are waiting for them, speaking in poor Italian, and sort the healthy men out from the rest, offering thin assurances that people will be reunited with their families eventually. Those considered unfit to labor for the Reich are sent away and never seen again. "Thus, in an instant, our women, our parents, our children disappeared." Two groups of bedraggled, filthy individuals arrive, walking in columns with their heads down, and begin unloading luggage—the new arrivals immediately understand that this is "the metamorphosis that awaited us." The healthy Jewish men are loaded onto trucks and driven elsewhere. The officer standing guard in Levi's truck kindly asks each man if he can have their money or jewelry, since they won't be needing it any longer.

The ease with which the Germans lie—saying that individuals will be reunited with their family—and the civility with which the officer asks the Jewish prisoners for their money or jewelry again underscores how disconnected the captors seem from the suffering they inflict. They seem to go about their tasks as if it were any other job or task that did not involve routine violence and facilitating the deaths of thousands of people. This not only nods to the dehumanization the Germans inflicted on the Jewish people, but also the moral relativity of their actions in their own minds.

CHAPTER 2. ON THE BOTTOM

After 20 minutes, the new arrivals are unloaded from the truck and deposited in a large, cold room, where they are left alone for what seems like hours. An SS officer arrives, and after finding a German-speaking Jewish person to translate for him, explains that the Jewish prisoners must arrange themselves in rows, strip naked and set their clothes bundled beside them on the floor. The officer seems dispassionate and calm. Prisoners with razors and shears enter, hastily shave each man completely bald, and leave, whereupon the naked arrivals are pushed into a large shower and left alone again for another long period. Levi acts reassuring towards his fellows, but he is secretly convinced they will soon all die.

Continuing the theme of dehumanization, the Jewish prisoners are treated much like objects in an assembly line. They are moved, sorted, and treated by different people at various stages, all without regard for their personal wellbeing. Levi's reassurance towards his comrades, despite his own conviction that they are doomed, becomes a common occurrence throughout the story, suggesting that in the face of such overwhelming, false hope is perhaps better than no hope.

A Hungarian prisoner enters the shower and speaks to them in poor Italian, explaining that they are in Monowitz, a section of Auschwitz, and will be placed in an Arbeitslager (work camp) that produces rubber with roughly ten thousand other prisoners. There are a variety of jobs—this man is a doctor, for instance—and everyone will be put to work. The Hungarian answers questions as well as he can, but many of his answers are nonsensical. He leaves, and hot water pours from the shower heads for "five minutes of bliss" before the Jews are herded out of the shower, naked and freezing, into another room, given a ragged set of clothes and wooden-soled **shoes**, and made to run 100 yards through the snow to yet another hut before they can dress themselves.

The rhythm of brief comfort followed by misery—from the cold room to the hot shower to freezing naked outdoors—will become a constant in the Jewish prisoners' lives in the concentration camp. Such a rhythm seems only to batter the senses, alternately raising one's guard and briefly lowering it. The nonsensical nature of the process—showering then being made to run naked across the dirty ground—will also typify their experience, since the camp operates on absurd and arbitrary rules which cause suffering that seemingly lacks sense or purpose.

Stripped of all possessions, even their own hair, the newly-arrived Jews now feel like hollow men, "reduced to suffering and needs," whose lives now only represent their utility to their German captors. Levi is tattooed with the **number** 174517 on his wrist, and he officially becomes a Häftling, a prisoner of the camp. The tattooed number becomes his identity and his way of receiving rations each day. In the first weeks, Levi catches himself habitually looking to the place his wristwatch should be, only to see the number instead.

Possession of property is a distinctly human characteristic, and thus stripping one of all possessions furthers the dehumanization of the Jews at the hands of the Germans. The tattooed number on each man's wrist, sitting where his wristwatch ought to be, thus operates as a symbol of their dehumanization, a permanent reminder that within the camp, they are insignificant, interchangeable pieces in a massive machine.

Over time, Levi and some of the others realize that the **numbers** can tell one everything they need to know about another prisoner: when they entered the camps, which convoy they are in, what their nationality is. Those with low numbers are respected and feared, since they are the few Poles and Greeks who have survived for years through shrewdness and ferocity. Those with high numbers are newly arrived, considered to be fools.

The significance of the numbers furthers their dehumanizing quality, since each man's value in the camp is dictated only by their number, and not by their character, their skills, or their individual traits that make them a unique human being. That those with low numbers are feared indicates that some level of shrewdness or ferocity will be required for survival.

After being **tattooed**, the new arrivals are driven into another hut full of bunks, but they are forbidden to touch them. When any requests are made for amenities, the prisoners are told, "You are not at home, this is not a sanatorium, the only exit is by way of the Chimney." Still desperately thirsty, Levi reaches through the window and grabs an icicle, but a guard strikes him and throws it away. When Levi asks why he did this, the guard tells him, "There is no why here." Levi realizes that this is the meaning of an extermination camp, to rid one of themselves. Together, they are all "lying on the bottom."

"There is no why here" is a particularly chilling phrase, revealing that every rule and prohibition of the camp is less a matter of practicality than of inflicting suffering on the Jews at every possible opportunity. Thus, dehumanization is not merely a side effect of the concentration camp, but its intended purpose. The Germans are setting out to destroy the Jewish prisoners' humanity, and thus to make them view themselves as the Nazis view them.

As the day draws to a close, the arrivals are let out to see the workers return from their daily labor. Levi meets a young Polish boy of about 16 named Schlome, who explains to him in broken Italian that he has been in the camp for three years, working as an ironsmith. When Levi tells him that he is a trained chemist, Schlome tells him that is a good skill to have. The boy asks Levi where his mother is, and Levi tells him that she is safe, hiding in Italy. The youth embraces Levi, who recalls that he never forgets "his serious and gentle face of a child, which welcomed me on the threshold of the house of the dead."

The dissonance of meeting a child, who should be filled with the potential of his future life, in a place of death, creates a feeling of horror in the reader and suggests that what occurs in the concentration camps is fundamentally at odds with the way the world should operate. Though not overt, this dissonance itself condemns the crusade of the Nazis and the practice of slavery and subjugation embodied in the concentration camps.

The arrivals quickly learn the much about the Lager. It is 600 square yards surrounded by electric barbed wire. There are 60 blocks (huts) which each house roughly 200 prisoners. The Häftling population is composed of criminals, political prisoners, and Jewish people, although everyone else has authority over the Jewish prisoners.

This demonstrates the extent of the racial hierarchy that the Germans establish within the camps. In their minds, regardless of where one might sit in the social order, there is nothing lower than a Jewish person—which consequently furthers their aim of dehumanization.

Every piece of wire or string the prisoners can find has practical value, and everything will be stolen at first opportunity. Each prisoner must always carry their possessions (their shirt, wooden **shoes**, soup bowl, and spoon) in hand, or sleep with them under their head. The camp is governed by many arbitrary rules—the set of one's shirt, the number of buttons on their jacket, and so on—that must be observed, or one will be beaten.

The common practice of theft and the arbitrary rules, which nonetheless are punished with beatings, both nod to the fact that morality works differently within the camp than it does in the outside world. This suggests that morality itself is a relative concept, defined by one's circumstances rather than by permanent rules.

Shoes are of primary importance, since "death begins with the shoes." A man wearing broken or ill-fitting shoes invites foot sores or swelling, making it difficult to march and to work. This invites more beatings and punishment, and makes the SS see them as a burden on everyone else, a particularly dangerous scenario.

Shoes operate as a symbol throughout the story for one's place in the social hierarchy. The Jews are only allowed wooden shoes, which cause dangerous sores and infections, while it will be revealed that other prisoners are allowed leather shoes, which fit more comfortably and do not ruin one's feet.

Each man works each day unless they are deemed ill, but one will only be deemed so if the overseers believe their working skills are essential enough to be worth preserving their life. Each man is assigned to work in a Kommando, usually comprised of 50 to 150 laborers, each governed by a Kapo. Unskilled Kommandos are usually led by prisoners, while skilled labor Kommandos most often have Polish or German civilian Kapos. Laborers work with the daylight, between eight and 12 hours per day, according to season.

Once again, the fact that a prisoner is only considered worth treating if they possess valuable skills illustrates the dehumanization of the Jewish people. The German camp officials do not recognize the Jewish prisoners as human beings worth saving, but only as utilities for labor. Thus, if one is unskilled and can be easily enough replaced, it is not even worth offering medical treatment to them. In the Germans' minds, the Jewish prisoners are only valuable for what labor they can perform, not who they are as individuals.

Within a month, Levi is accustomed to the ways of the Lager, accustomed to chronic pain and hunger, and to thinking neither of the past nor the future, but only his immediate needs. Levi reflects, "Already my body is not my own." Theft is no longer a crime, but a necessity; to steal something is to possess it "by full right." The Italians in the camp meet weekly for a time, but give it up since there are less and less of them each week. They all grow more "deformed and more squalid" as the time passes. Together, they agree "it was better not to think."

Continuing the theme of dehumanization, Levi finds that as a slave laborer, he does not even feel ownership over his own body, again robbing him of his humanity. Furthermore, not only have the Jews lost the right of possession, but due to the pain of living they even begin to lose their capacity to think or contemplate, another uniquely human characteristic.

CHAPTER 3. INITIATION

In his first few days, after being moved from hut to hut, Levi is assigned to a Kommando and to sleep in Block 30. His first night of sleep is fitful, and when the morning alarm sounds, each prisoner frantically makes his bed, dresses, and runs to receive his ration of **bread**, some even urinating on themselves as they travel to save time. Bread functions as the camp currency and an obsession, "the holy grey slab which seems gigantic in your neighbor's hand, and in your own hand so small as to make you cry."

As the only possession and the primary form of currency, bread symbolizes a prisoner's wellbeing and status, as well as the degree to which they exercise their humanity. As will be seen, for a prisoner to have enough bread to sell means that they are not only comparatively wealthy and strong (since they can afford not to eat it), but also that they have learned to exist within the Lager by trading, scheming.

The latrine is filthy and within one week, Levi begins neglecting to wash himself, since one has to stand before a cold sink with his possessions clutched between his knees and scrub himself with filthy water and no soap. However, an older Jew, Steinlauf, chastises Levi for this, saying that they must hold onto ever scrap and remnant of humanity they can to resist the Lager and its campaign "to make us into beasts." Levi considers this, though is not entirely convinced by Steinlauf's system of ethics and resistance, and wonders himself whether it would be better to have no system in place at all.

Steinlauf's point is insightful, even if Levi does not entirely grasp it. Since the Germans actively want to dehumanize the Jews and thus make reality conform to Nazi ideology, the most immediate and practical way to fight their gross ideology is to refuse to become beasts. This suggests that, although the Jewish prisoners are physically weak, they still have the power to combat Nazism by thwarting its aim of dehumanization.

CHAPTER 4. KA-BE

The days blur together and everything seems hostile, even the clouds in the sky. Levi is paired for work with a young man whom everyone calls Null Achtzehn (German for "018") since he does not seem alive enough to even be called by his name. Null Achtzehn has lost all sense of humanness, even the ability to know when he must cease straining or he will kill himself with exhaustion. He is, essentially, a drone. As Levi and Null Achtzehn are carrying steel pieces of a railroad and Levi is daydreaming about stowing away on a supply wagon, Null Achtzehn blankly drops his end of the load and it falls on Levi's foot, cutting a gash across the back of his heel.

Null Achtzehn represents the final end to which the Germans hope to push all Jews within the camp—unthinking, unfeeling, and beast-like. This is exemplified by the fact that no one seems to know Null Achtzehn's name. Since he has become precisely what the Nazis want him to become, even his fellow prisoners will accept calling him by the number the Nazis have given him. In this way, Null Achtzehn is a foil for Steinlauf in "Initiation," who prides himself on maintaining his humanity at all costs.

The Kapo arrives and strikes the workers for the disruption, though the blows do not hurt compared to the pain in Levi's foot. He is put on an easier work detail for the rest of the day and two other prisoners help him painfully make the march back to camp at the day's end. After evening ration, Levi goes to Krankenbau, or Ka-Be, the infirmary. Only the "economically useful Jews" are considered for treatment at all, and even of those, if someone cannot recover within two weeks, they are most often sent to the gas chambers.

Levi's admission into Ka-Be, even to be considered, indicates that the camp administrators believe that he is "economically useful" and has some future utility other than mere physical labor. Although it will take a long time for this to play out, this status as an "economically useful" prisoner will be one of a number of factors that contribute to his survival.

Since it is forbidden to wear **shoes** in the infirmary, Levi must stand barefoot in the mud while he waits his turn to be seen. The foot is quickly inspected, and it is decided that Levi will have to return tomorrow, during the work day. This makes it a "good wound," since it does not seem overly serious but may mean a small reprieve from labor. The following morning during roll call, Levi is separated from the others and made to wait with those scheduled to be seen in Ka-Be. The waiting prisoners are made to strip naked, stand in the cold for inspection, take a shower, stand naked in the cold again, take another shower, and again wait in the cold. Levi observes that "We have been on our feet for ten hours and naked for six."

Once again, the cruel and arbitrary system of admission into Ka-Be—showering twice, standing naked in the cold for hours, and so on—reiterates the camp practice of inflicting suffering on the Jewish prisoners as an end in itself, further building upon the theme of dehumanization. The arbitrary, counter-intuitive rules of entry, such as having ill prisoners stand barefoot in the cold mud while they wait to be seen, suggests that the Germans are far more interested in maintaining their established systems than caring for the health or wellbeing of the Jewish patients.

Levi is given a quick second examination, the doctor painfully poking at his bloodied, swelling foot, and then he is left in a waiting room with a huge Polish prisoner. The Pole sees Levi's **number** and recognizes that he is an Italian Jew and laughs at him, since the Italian Jews are known to be recent arrivals and worthless workers, intellectuals ill-suited to life in the camp. The Pole tells him in "near-German" that he will be sent to the crematorium.

The Pole's belittling of Levi suggests that the racial hierarchy held by the Germans is also shared, to some degree, by other non-Jewish prisoners in the camp as well. This makes sense, in a cruel way, since by having another race lower than themselves in the hierarchy of the camp, their own suffering will be lessened to some degree.

Several hours later, Levi is processed by another official who takes down his name and his civilian profession, and Levi is sent with the other inpatients to another dormitory. Levi is one of the few to have his own bunk to himself, and he falls into a deep sleep. Life in Ka-Be is easy; they follow the same schedule as the working prisoners, but rather than work, they sleep the intermittent hours away in their bunks. However, they can still hear the drums of the musicians playing the marching rhythm in the central square as the laborers march out to work and return as exhausted husks of men.

It is ironic that the camp infirmary, full of sick or wounded people, represents a sort of safe shelter. Although it might seem like a miserable place, in reality it guards prisoners from the other dangers of the camp: the harsh cold and backbreaking labor. This, along with many other observations later made, demonstrates the manner in which life in the camp often seems to be an inversion of the way life works in the outside world.

One day Levi asks the men in the neighboring bunk about the selections and the crematorium, which everyone in camp alludes to but no one speaks directly of. The following day, a German officer makes an inspection of the Ka-Be inpatients, selecting one of Levi's neighbors among the group to be sent to die. Those going to die do so silently, without anger, and no one speaks to them or bids farewell. "Without display or anger, massacre moves through the huts of Ka-Be every day, touching here or there."

For those selected, their silent journey to death without any conflict, grief, or even comfort offered by their comrades, again represents another form of dehumanization. Just as the Jews were not allowed the chance to grieve before they were loaded onto the trains in Italy, so too the prevalence of death in the camp has taken away their ability to reckon with their own passing or even feel the gravity of it.


"Ka-Be is the Lager without its physical discomforts." With the additional time to rest and without the pains of labor or cold to drive all thought from one's mind, the residents of Ka-Be have the painful opportunity to again reflect on their lot and what they have become. They dwell on how fragile their sense of self is (even more so than their bodies are) and the pain of missing home. They have become mindless slaves who are dying in spirit before their bodies have the chance to break.

The Jewish prisoners' dehumanization represents an existential death. When the Germans are successful in crushing their human spirit, their sense of self dies long before their bodies. This campaign to destroy men's spirits while keeping their bodies for labor is particularly horrific, demonstrating Nazis' great evil. In a sense, this strategy is crueler than killing a man right away but allowing him to retain his humanity until the end.


CHAPTER 5. OUR NIGHTS

After 20 days, Levi's foot is mostly healed and he is ejected from Ka-Be to his "great displeasure." Leaving Ka-Be is dangerous in itself, since one is put randomly into a new block and new Kommando where they are unaware of the rules, customs, the inclinations of the Kapo. Every unknown element is a threat to his survival.

Levi's observation that the unknown is dangerous suggests that, in an environment as chaotic and unpredictable as the Lager, any knowledge one may gain about their neighbors or their surroundings is a useful tool for survival.

However, Levi is assigned to Block 45, which is fortunate since his best friend Alberto lives in that block and has become quite popular and respected. Alberto is two years younger than Levi, but shrewd and intuitive, able to make himself understood even when he does not speak a man's language—for there are many different languages in the camp, and communication is often difficult. Alberto intuitively understands whom to befriend and whom to avoid.

This introduces Alberto, who is not only the second-most present character aside from Levi himself, but who also demonstrates the manner in which resourcefulness and cunning aid one's meager chance of survival in the Lager, especially in an environment where even the ability to communicate is hampered by such a variety of languages.

That evening, a prisoner who is famed as a Yiddish storyteller enters and chants a song he has composed about life in the camp, to the great enjoyment of the others, although Levi and most other Italians do not understand the language. Meanwhile, a former engineer plies his clandestine trade of tending to other prisoner's foot sores and corns. The lights go out, signaling it is time to sleep, and Levi climbs into his bunk, pressed up against the back of a large stranger.

In light of the camp's dehumanizing effect, actions like telling stories or plying one's trade in the evening hours are distinctively human activities, and thus represent their own form of resistance to Nazi ideology and its campaign to strip the Jews of their very humanity. Maintaining such practices in such a difficult environment nods to the resilience of the human spirit.

Levi dreams fitfully of laying on a train track and of seeing his sister, trying to tell her about the life of the camp and all he has seen and heard and felt, but she turns away, uninterested in hearing his story. The pain of her disinterest wakes him, and around him Levi hears the other prisoners sleeping, their jaws moving as they dream the common, collective dream of food. He assumes it is late, since many men are already moving to and from the waste bucket, which their strained kidneys force each man to visit many times each night. Even so, night is a reprieve, an "armor" against the horrors of the camp, even though they often haunt the prisoners' dreams as well.

Levi's dream of being unheard represents a common fear—that the suffering the Jewish prisoners endure will never be acknowledged by the rest of the world. In the preface to Survival in Auschwitz, *Primo Levi wrote that this particular fear became his primary motivation in writing down this story in 1946 so that the pain and cruelty he and his comrades experienced would not go unseen or unheard.*

The morning bell at dawn and the apologetic command by the night guard to wake and rise for the day becomes a daily point of pain. The gentleness of night is replaced by the "hurricane" of the day as each man scrambles to make his bed, dress, and get to the latrine, and as each man's foot sores once again bring fresh pain.

Once again, the camp seems defined by the rhythm of pain and reprieve, danger and shelter, which one imagines must only make the suffering and the loss of any sense of time even worse. Even in the quiet moments, more suffering is only hours away.

CHAPTER 6. THE WORK

Levi becomes bunkmates with Resnyk, a Polish Jewish man who lived in France before he was arrested. Although Resnyk is large and takes up much of the bunk, he is kind and courteous, and Levi appreciates his company when they are assigned to the same Kommando. The Kapo accompanies his Kommando to the worksite, hands them off to a civilian supervisor, and goes to sleep in a toolshed. The Kapo has no need to be cruel since he is not a Jewish Kapo and he has no fear of losing his position. The civilian supervisor sets the prisoners to work unloading iron pipes from a transport, one of which is several tons. Although dangerous, this is a fortunate task, since the prisoners will have proper tools and it is less fatiguing to work with large loads than small ones.

As a prisoner of the camp who suffers like everyone else, Resnyk is uncommonly human and decent, proof that the human goodness can endure even the dehumanization and suffering inflicted by the Nazis. Levi's brief observation that Jewish Kapos tend towards cruelty so as to protect their own position hints at an idea that will be explored further later in the narrative. In the midst of oppression, those few individuals who gather power for themselves tend to become even more oppressive out of fear of losing their position which has temporarily reduced their own suffering.

When the men are set to carry 175-pound timbers to build a pathway for the pipes to travel, Levi tries to pair himself with Resnyk since he is large and strong. Resnyk accepts, to Levi's surprise, and voluntarily carries most of the load without complaint since he knows that Levi is weaker and clumsier. As Levi stands, exhausted, Resnyk gently encourages him, and walks with him as slowly as possible to retrieve their next load. After their second trip, Levi requests to be taken to the latrine, "an oasis of peace," which offers another respite from work, since their site is on the opposite end of the camp.

Once again, Resnyk demonstrates a kindness and propensity for self-sacrifice rarely seen amongst the prisoners in the camp, proving that such human goodness can still endure in extraordinary individuals. Levi's description of the latrine as an "oasis of peace" once again seems ironic, indicating the way in which the Lager flips normal life upside-down. Normally, the latrine would be a foul but necessary utility, but in the camp it represents shelter and rest.

Returning from the latrine, Levi carries two or three more timbers with Resnyk until it is time to receive the lunch ration and feel the bliss of temporarily-sated hunger and a brief respite indoors. As camp custom dictates, each man eats quickly and then falls asleep where they are sitting within a minute. No one speaks so as not to disturb the brief reverie. After the period is up, the Kapo quietly, almost apologetically, tells his men to get back outside and work once more. "Oh if one could only cry!" thinks Levi.

The Kapo's gentle command suggests that, unlike the German guards, the Kapos—at least the benevolent ones—are not interested in inflicting pointless suffering on the Jewish prisoners. This indicates that the quest to dehumanize the Jews is a uniquely German pursuit that is typically not undertaken by the various other ethnicities at the camp.

CHAPTER 7. A GOOD DAY

Levi recognizes that human beings are bound to seek meaning and purpose in life. For the Häftlinge of Auschwitz in the midst of winter, that purpose is merely to survive until the spring. This day, the sun breaks through the cloud and the haze, and the men take it as a sign that "the worst is over." The Greek Jews, the longest-surviving and toughest prisoners "whom the Germans respect and the Poles fear" gather themselves into a circle and sing and chant and stamp their feet together, seeming intoxicated by the songs. The prisoners are both happy and pained, because in the clear of the day they can now see the Auschwitz steeple and Birkenau, where they know that their wives and children were killed.

The Jewish prisoners finding their purpose solely in surviving the winter months demonstrates the degree to which the concentration camp has swallowed every aspect of their lives. Rather than abiding by intellectual philosophies or religious ideals as many would have had in civilian life, survival becomes the only goal with any meaning. Meanwhile, the Greeks' gathering and singing together once again represents a mark of humanity. Such practices may in fact be why the Greeks are the longest-surviving and most respected prisoners in the camp.

The Buna, the rubber factory which unites the Jewish Lager as well as several others, is as big as a city, consuming the labor of 40,000 prisoners. 10,000 of them are Jewish. As the sun burns the fog away, the prisoners can see the Buna's tower stretching into the sky. Although thousands have worked and died to produce the factory, the few survivors will one day learn that not a single ounce of rubber was ever made. Even so, the sun has put the prisoners in good spirits, and they imagine that if not for their gnawing hunger, they might be truly happy in that moment. Seeing a steam shovel at work, they watch with envy as its mechanical mouth chews through the earth and each man dreams of meals eaten in a past life, when scarcity and hunger were not governing principles of life.

Although the prisoners are unaware of it at the time, the factory's failure to produce any rubber, despite how many human lives it cost to build, once again adds to the pointless suffering inflicted upon the Jewish people. Although slave labor is unfortunately found throughout human history, the Nazis' use of slave labor is even darker considering it evidently does not a purpose other than to make people suffer. The dreams of past meals reiterate what a powerful and constant presence hunger is the prisoners' lives, dominating every moment.

The Kommando's "organizer" (the man who finds or bargains for additional food, tools, and supplies) has managed to obtain a large amount of civilian soup. Their Kapo, a decent man, is happy to occasionally let their organizer sneak away from his work duties to ferret extra rations, and today it has paid off. Each prisoner will get an additional six pints of hearty soup, distributed throughout the afternoon, and five minutes' rest from the afternoon's work in which to eat it. The prisoners return to the camp in high spirits, their hunger sated, with the spring sun shining down on them.

Just as life has been reduced to a simple, grim purpose, happiness comes through the simple circumstances of an extra bit of soup and some brief sunshine. The concentration camp's ability to strip life down to its barest, most basic elements in this way is common, particularly as the prisoners are reduced over time to mere shells of their former selves.

CHAPTER 8. THIS SIDE OF GOOD AND EVIL

The prisoners of the Lager hear a rumor that shirts will soon be issued once again, taken from a new batch of arrivals to the labor and death camps. This sends every man who has somehow gained possession of more than one shirt to the illicit Exchange Market established in the north-east corner of the camp—the men with shirts to sell want to liquidate them before their value is deflated. Although forbidden by the SS, the Market thrives, functioning like any other economy except that it deals in such goods as soup, **bread**, tobacco, and **shoes**, each valued at fluctuating exchange rates based upon a ration of bread. As with all things, the Greek Jews dominate the Market, being the best thieves and the most auspicious merchants.

The development of an entire illicit economy within the camp demonstrates the high level of adaptability that human beings can display in any environment. Though life has been reduced to the basic principles of life and death, many men still find ways to grow their investments and gather additional resources. Although the Germans attempt to dehumanize the Jewish prisoners at every opportunity, the existence of an economic market suggests that, at least for the more enterprising individuals, holding onto some level of humanity is still possible.

As with standard economics, the prisoners engage in various—often complex—investment schemes, even trading with Polish civilians, investing camp-issued tobacco for a return of **bread**, eating a portion and then reinvesting their remainder to purchase a shirt which can then be flipped on the market. Prisoners with sharp minds and strong networks of relationships in and outside the camp can see high yields on their investments. Many have their gold fillings pulled from their teeth to use as starting collateral. Some even scam new-arrivals, stricken with such unfamiliar hunger, out of their own gold fillings.

Levi describes the process of "organizing" additional rations and investing in beneficial connections, which becomes one of the primary methods of surviving the camps. Although as described, such organizing requires an astute mind, it becomes one of the primary deciding factors in whether or not a prisoner will last more than a few months, highlighting the need for shrewdness and adaptability for the sake of survival.

Although contact between Häftlinge and civilians is expressly forbidden and harshly punished, the possibility for financial gain makes it commonplace. Civilians found guilty of interaction with prisoners are themselves sent to the camps for periods of months as punishment, though they are not shorn or tattooed. For them, the labor camp is merely a temporary sentence, not an extended state of existence. Anything that can be stolen and may be useful to other prisoners, to Kapos (who need supplies for their workers) or to civilians is pilfered and introduced to the underground economy. The nurses of Ka-Be are known to be a primary force in the Market's functioning, selling the **shoes** and clothes of the dead as well as various chemicals and kits. More than anything, the nurses sell spoons, which cannot be obtained otherwise and which the nurses confiscate from outgoing patients, as if it were their fee.

Levi makes a brief but poignant observation that for German or Polish civilians sent to the camps for fraternizing with Jews, the camps represent only a punishment rather than an identity. They are not shaved or tattooed because the Germans do not wish to strip them of their identities, only to punish them for wrongdoing. This differentiation once again reveals something of the Nazis' attitude towards the Jews. In their eyes, the Jews are worse than prisoners, worse than criminals whom the Germans allow to maintain their human decency. Rather, the Jews are seen as something to be destroyed and obliterated, undeserving of the very right to exist and be people on the basis of their ethnicity.

Levi notes that "Theft in Buna, punished by the civil direction, is authorized and encouraged by the SS; theft in the camp, severely repressed by the SS, is considered by the civilian as a normal exchange operation." With these varying precedents of the ubiquity of theft and its necessity for survival, Levi suggests to the reader that "good and "evil" and "just" and "unjust" mean entirely different things to the outside world than they do to the men of Auschwitz. Such simple, rigid morality simply cannot survive in the Lager.

Levi's challenge to the reader's preconceptions is straightforward: the morality of the outside world simply cannot stand within the prison camps. In such an environment, such petty morality has no bearing. This very strongly and directly argues that morality is thus based on one's circumstances rather than universal rules, dictates, or even religious commandments.

CHAPTER 9. THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED

Levi states that thus far he has only described the workings of life itself in the Lager, but now he would like to offer his own analysis. In his eyes, "the Lager was pre-eminently a gigantic biological and social experiment," since many men of different languages and traditions have been thrust together, left to survive or die by their own means. Although Levi admits that it could be argued that man is "fundamentally brutal, egoistic, or stupid in his conduct once every civilized institution is taken away," Levi disagrees with this conclusion. Rather, he believes that in dire enough circumstances, man's more civilized instincts and "social habits" are repressed.

Levi's direct and insightful analysis of the concentration camps, based on personal experience and written only years after, make it fairly unique among other personal accounts of the Holocaust. Levi himself is quite clear on this matter, noting in his preface that he chooses to focus less on the daily suffering—though it is obviously still present—since that has been handled by other authors, and instead offer his insights on the psychology of the prisoners and their various methods of survival.

Levi posits that in the camp, there are two types of people: "the saved" and "the drowned." Arguably, this distinction is more pertinent than good or bad, lucky or unlucky, since in the Lager, each person is "desperately and ferociously alone" and responsible for their own survival, without any social safety net to keep him from death or misery. The saved are those who learn to adapt themselves to the new environment of Auschwitz, who quickly learn how to "organize" extra rations, safer work, or fortuitous relationships with people in authority. The drowned, meanwhile, are those who do not organize, who pass their time thinking of home or complaining, and who quickly perish. Levi remarks that the few hundred Jewish prisoners who have survived more than three years, the first to arrive, did so only by ruthlessly organizing for their own survival, obtaining favorable positions and relationships.

That the delineation between those who survive and those who do not seems more pertinent to Levi than the divide between good and evil once again suggests that in such dire circumstances, morality itself becomes circumstantial, even secondary. This is particularly evident in the notion that those who survived often did so by forming good relationships with those who had power over them, especially the Germans. While from the reader's point of view (existing in normal society), such an association with an evil figure may seem unconscionable, Levi argues that it is justified so long as it helps one to organize, adapt, and survive.

Although in normal society, one might fall somewhere in between the drowned and the saved, in the Lager, there is no middle ground. Drowning is the easiest path to take, since it requires no action. One must simply eat what they are given, obey orders, and keep their head down until exhaustion, fatigue, or misfortune takes them. "The drowned form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march in silence." Levi reflects that if he could wrap all the evils of the Holocaust into one single image, it would be the picture of "an emaciated man, head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen." He has seen thousands upon thousands of such men.

In its own way, the Lager functions as a microcosm of human society stripped down to the barest components of survival and with any social safety net or protective government removed. Although many of the basic interactions and relationships remain roughly the same—economics, establishment of a social hierarchy, and so on—the stakes are raised, and the consequences of failure are far higher. This explains then, why to simple carry on will inevitably mean death. If an individual is not willing to fight and scheme for his life every day, he cannot possibly survive.

Contrary to the drowned (who follow the single, easiest path downward), there are many paths to survival, though each are "difficult and improbable." The most common strategy is to become a "prominent": a Jewish camp official such as a Kapo, doctor, cook, or night-guard. Being a prominent is advantageous and hard-won, but the fear of losing their post for not being ruthless enough drives Jewish prominents to be even more vicious and violent towards their fellow Jewish people than the non-Jewish authority figures. For this reason, there is much hatred between the Jewish underlings and the Jewish superiors, even though most, given the opportunity, would take up such a role themselves. The non-Jewish prominents and Kapos are most often German criminals selected to supervise Jewish prisoners, or else Russian or Polish political prisoners.

Levi's observations about Jewish prisoners who become Kapos and are given power over their comrades are particularly poignant and align with observations made in similar scenarios elsewhere in the world. The exceptional cruelty of the Jewish Kapos demonstrates that, when a formerly-oppressed person is suddenly given power over their fellows, most often they themselves become even worse oppressors, maximizing their use of their newfound power in order to gain a sense of justice for the cruelty that was inflicted against them.

Even among the Jewish underlings, many join the saved merely though their own willpower and ability to hustle and organize, fighting the overwhelming fatigue of the camp rather than submitting themselves to it. Some do this by letting go of their conscience completely and becoming ruthless and beastly towards their fellows. Others do it through extraordinary use of wit and cunning, though only "saints and martyrs" do not compromise their own morality in some fashion.

Once again, morality within a survival situation is suggested to be circumstantial rather than universal. Although many of the men contradict their own consciences to survive, Levi's narration never condemns such action, even when it seems bestial, but rather treats it with understanding and even approval, indicating that what constitutes morality has entirely shifted in the context of Auschwitz.

Levi demonstrates the dynamics of the saved and the damned through the stories of four men he knew. The first is a man named Schepschel, who though not particularly strong or cunning, occasionally steals brooms to sell to one of the block supervisors, and uses the capital he gains to have the cobbler improve his **shoes**. Sometimes people see him singing and dancing for the Slovak workers in exchange for a little extra soup. In a bid to gain favor with the Block commander and perhaps find a favorable work assignment, Schepschel betrays an accomplice to one of his thefts. In these ways, the man scratches out his own mere survival with what little faculties he has.

Schepschel provides an example of survival at any cost, particularly at the cost of one's own dignity. Singing and dancing for dregs of soup and openly betraying his own accomplice suggests that Schepschel has abandoned all sense of decorum or pride. Although this allows him to survive and numbers him among the saved, it is hard not to see Schepschel's self-demeaning behavior as dehumanizing himself, which thus makes it a victory for Nazi ideology.

Alfred L., formerly an engineer and the head of a renowned chemical manufacturer, is in his mid-fifties and looks thin, rather than strong. Although he is an underling, L. has the self-control to live on only a portion of his **bread** ration, using the rest to buy soap with which to clean his face and razors to keep himself looking trim. He acts with the utmost decorum, even though it often disadvantages him, correctly making the long-term bet that if he appears like a prominent, he will eventually become one. When L. is appointed as the technical lead of the chemical Kommando, he uses his position to efficiently suppress any younger man who seems like he may at some point become a rival. Levi loses track of him, but believes it probable he survived Auschwitz and continues the "cold life of the determined and joyless dominator."

Alfred L. is a foil to Schepschel's self-demeaning survival. Rather than abandoning his own human dignity, L. capitalizes on the loss of dignity of his fellow Jewish prisoners by keeping himself looking clean, sharp, and distinguished amidst the throng of haggard men. While this seems like a nobler method of survival, it is still in itself quite cynical, as it takes advantage of the dehumanization of the people around him. However, once again, survival justifies the means, though it does not seem to endear Levi to L. at all.

Elias Lindzin is short, squat, and powerful, with a body like Hercules and face "like a battering ram." He is a tremendous worker, seemingly untiring, often carrying three or four times the loads of other prisoners. He also seems insane, constantly talking, making absurd speeches, doing grotesque impressions, running about, or disappearing. Despite this, he is so good-natured that everyone in the camp loves him. Before long, his reputation as a worker is such that he is set aside to be utilized only for special projects, meaning that he does not work much at all. Levi does not know what happens to Elias after the war is over, but he imagines that he would be ill-suited to civil society and would most likely be a criminal or asylum patient. But in the camp, he is unstoppable, and moreover seems genuinely happy.

Out of the four examples given (indeed, out of most characters in the story), Elias is easily the most suited to the grim, cruel life of the camp precisely because he would be ill-suited for the rest of society. Although there is little to be gleaned about survival from Elias's manner of coping—since he is a rather abnormal individual—his odd suitability to the Lager once again demonstrates the manner in which the rules and strata of the outside world are inverted within the walls of the Lager. Those destined to be successful in the outside world are ill-suited to the camp, while those who do not fit in civil society find that they excel, even though imprisoned.

Henri is a young, astute man, well-educated and well-read, with an almost frightening ability to understand a person's motivations and weaknesses. Henri postulates that there are three effective methods of survival that will not make man into a beast: organization, pity, and theft. Henri uses all three, but is particularly skilled at manipulating pity and compassion to establish what seem like genuine friendships with people. In reality, they are ruthlessly calculated. Having earned the affection of the camp doctors and the most important prominents, soldiers, and civilians, Henri is easily sheltered from selection and hard labor and leverages his position to obtain many goods to sell. Henri seems warm and friendly, utterly human, until one realizes the scope of his cold, inhuman intellect. Levi knows that Henri is still alive and free somewhere, and is curious to know where, but never wants to meet the man again.

Henri represents the path to survival through shrewd manipulation and well-calculated schemes. Though he is not powerful like Elias or groveling like Schepschel, Henri's survival, like Alfred L.'s, suggests that as physically demanding as the Lager is, it is perhaps even more advantageous to be cunning and ruthless. Although Henri manages to survive without demeaning or humiliating himself, thus resisting the dehumanization thrust upon him, his cold manipulation of other people still makes him a rather disturbing figure, even to Levi himself.

CHAPTER 10. CHEMICAL EXAMINATION

Three months into Levi's internment, the Chemical Kommando is formed. Fifteen Häftlinge, including Levi and Alberto, are assigned to it. Although it was assumed that the Kommando would be a skilled trade unit, and that the Kapo should naturally be a chemist, it is instead a German "professional delinquent," a small buffoon named Alex who announces that he will not let such Jewish "intellectuals" get the best of him; he promises to be ruthless. However, he also announces that each man will be tested by camp officials as a chemist—those who fail will be thrown out, but those who pass will be made specialists. While the others in the unit are disheartened, Levi (who is not ruthless enough to be an effective organizer or survive through cunning) sees this as his first real chance at survival.

Alex's assignment as the head of a group of Jewish "intellectuals" exemplifies the Nazis' racial hierarchy. Although Alex is clearly an idiot, the German belief that any German person is naturally superior to any Jewish person dictates that in their view, Alex is fit to lead a group of men clearly more intelligent and capable than himself. Alex's foolishness, then, not only provides an example of the supposed racial hierarchy, but also provides its own counter-argument. Although Alex is a German, he is clearly an inferior man—less intelligent and of lesser character than his Jewish underlings.

Of the 15 underlings, three disappear, five more admit that they are not chemists, but the remaining seven are tested by a German professional three days later. When Levi stands before the German administrator, Doktor Pannwitz, he feels as if the man is watching him through aquarium glass like a specimen, rather than as a human being. Levi imagines that if he could ever know what was happening in his tester's mind at that moment, he would finally understand "the great insanity of the third Germany."

This is the most salient depiction of the Germans' dehumanization of the Jewish prisoners, suggesting that is present in even a German individual's perception of another person. Although Doktor Pannwitz, who himself seems to be a chemist, is speaking about technical matters to another chemist and clearly recognizes Levi's skill, he still cannot bring himself to look at Levi as a human being.

The examination commences and Levi is pleased to feel his mind, so long neglected, springing back to life, recalling data and information he learned from studying chemistry in university. Pannwitz speaks German in a manner that is difficult to understand, but Levi keeps up, his stature improving as they converse. When Pannwitz shows him several texts that Levi studied in college, the consistency between his past life and this one strikes him as strange. The test concludes. Levi feels it has gone well but knows that optimism is a foolish thing to possess in the Lager. As he returns across the camp with Alex, Alex disinterestedly wipes a greasy hand on Levi's shirt to clean it. Levi reflects that on that simple action, he has formed his judgment of Alex, Doktor Pannwitz, and so many others in the camp.

For Levi, who has spent the past three months learning not to think and allowing himself to become less and less of a human being, this moment represents a critical turn. For the first time since his arrest in Italy, Levi's intellect and technical capacity are being recognized and he is using his mental faculties in an acutely human way. It is ironic that this show of humanness is happening before a German camp administrator, who fails to see him as human at all, but for Levi's character and internal struggle to maintain and protect his humanity, it is still a significant moment. However, it is contradicted by Alex's casual use of Levi's shirt as a washrag, which is itself a dehumanizing treatment.

CHAPTER 11. THE CANTO OF ULYSSES

As the men of the Chemical Kommando are working, Jean arrives. Jean is a teenager, the Kommando's messenger-clerk, which is itself quite a powerful position among the prominents. Although Alex has kept his promise to be "violent and unreliable," Jean has skillfully ingratiated himself to Alex—in part by realizing that Alex is ruthless towards his workers, but utterly fearful of the civilian workers, the SS, and anyone who outranks him. As a result, this spares the underlings much of Alex's fury. Jean is well-liked by all, and Levi has struck up a recent friendship with him.

Alex is further revealed to be a coward, frightened of anyone he does not explicitly outrank, which only increases the perversity of his leading a Kommando of intellectuals. Once again, this serves to highlight the absurdity of the Germans' believed racial hierarchy, demonstrating that it is a baseless concept that does not have any bearing in reality.

Jean selects Levi to help him retrieve the noon ration with him, a walk which can easily be stretched to an hour. As they walk, they discuss their past lives, their family, the languages each can speak. Levi decides that he should like to try and teach Jean Italian, and begins by attempting to translate into French and explain the Canto of Ulysses in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. The effort makes Levi feel capable and full of possibility, and Jean is able to understand much of it, relating it to experiences he has had in his own life. Levi, struggling to piece it together, feels as if he is hearing it again "for the first time […] like the voice of God," and he briefly forgets who he is and all that has happened to him. Jean can see that it does Levi's spirit good, and enthusiastically engages with him.

Although Levi does not explicitly connect his desire to teach Jean Italian to the thrill he felt in recalling his knowledge of chemistry before Pannwitz, it seems likely that they were connected. For the past three months, Levi has kept his head down and taught himself not to think or consider anything beyond pain, cold, and hunger. Like the examination, Levi's thoroughly intellectual conversation with Jean suggests that his humanity is beginning to return to him and be strengthened by utilizing his mental faculties once again.

Levi gets stuck on one part of the canto, unsure how it connected together and how to express it in French. They reach the queue to receive their pot of soup to carry back, but Levi holds Jean back for a moment. It seems desperately important that he understand Dante and the Middle Ages, the various literary devices and cultural forces at play, because tomorrow either of them may be dead or they might never see each other again, such as things are in the Lager.

Levi's desperation to make Jean understand a purely intellectual concept—which will not actually help either of them to survive—again suggests that the passions of his former, intellectually rigorous life are beginning to return to him. Although for months he had slowly let go of himself, he is finally beginning to unwittingly resist the dehumanization thrust upon him.

CHAPTER 12. THE EVENTS OF SUMMER

Throughout the spring of 1944, so many Hungarians enter Auschwitz that Hungarian becomes the second most common language at the camp, after Yiddish. By August, those who entered with Levi five months prior are considered the "old hands of the camp." The chemist examination has not yet resulted in anything, though that is no great surprise. News spreads through the camp of a coming "Russian offensive" of the French at Normandy and an attempted assassination of Hitler, resulting in powerful but brief bursts of hope among the Häftlinge.

The fact that the Italian Jews are considered "old hands" after only five months underscores just how short the average lifespan of a Jewish prisoner is. Such hope amongst the prisoners must certainly be even more potently felt, since they are living in such a hopeless time and place, though the fact that such hope is brief suggests that they quickly return to their natural, deadened state.

That same month, aerial bombardments begin striking the camp. The Buna, rather than producing rubber, puts all its labor into reconstructing itself after each successive air raid. Life becomes chaotic and the German civilians grow frantic and furious, knowing that their long-held power and domination is threatened by the onset of the Russian army. Life becomes more difficult for the Jewish Häftlinge as they are denied entry into the air raid shelters and wait out each attack unprotected, but most are too tired to care. It is one more misery on top of every other.

The panic of the German civilians at the idea of losing their own power to oppress others is telling. They fear losing their dominance, since another party will soon become dominant over them, suggesting that they know full-well how morally wrong their treatment of the Jewish people has been from the start. Even so, their ill treatment of the Jewish prisoners does not become lessened in any way.

During this time, Levi meets an Italian citizen named Lorenzo who begins providing him extra food each day. He also gives him a patched vest, and even sends a postcard to Italy on Levi's behalf and delivers him the reply. There is no financial transaction or gain for Lorenzo—he takes the risk merely out of human decency. Levi thus joins the ranks of the organizers and guards the name and nature of his contact as jealously as a lover, as all prisoners do. Levi credits much of his survival to Lorenzo, though he cannot say why he should have such fortune rather than any other prisoner. Although most civilians treat the prisoners as untouchable, Lorenzo's expression of human decency reaffirms to Levi that the world exists beyond the walls of the Lager, and that there is goodness in it: "Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man."

Lorenzo, like Resnyk, provides an uncommon glimpse of humanity amidst the chaos and cruelty of the concentration camps. In Levi's journey of survival and struggle to maintain his own humanity, Lorenzo plays a critical role by simply treating him as a human being, deserving of sympathy and compassion. As generous as Lorenzo is, the fact that such generosity seems so uncommon casts a dark shadow over the rest of the human beings, particularly the free civilians, present in and around Auschwitz, who witness such suffering and such needs and yet ignore them.

CHAPTER 13. OCTOBER 1944

The Häftlinge try to will the coming winter away, but it is unavoidable. The onset of winter means many things. They will eat less, since **bread** must be used to buy gloves. They will sleep less, since night hours will be spent mending gloves. Seven out of 10 prisoners will die before the spring arrives. More ominously still, the Lager is overpopulated by 2,000 prisoners. Now that winter is coming, everyone will be indoors as often as possible. Such crowding is unsustainable, and the Germans prefer their numbers balanced and machines in proper working order—a selection is coming. Thousands will be sent to the gas chambers.

Winter, like everything else in the Lager, is stripped down to its barest essentials and made particularly dangerous by the cruelty of the Germans and lack of shelter and equipment for the Jewish prisoners. The Germans' balancing of prisoner populations like an accountant handles numbers on a spreadsheet once again highlights how much the Germans have dehumanized the Jewish people in their own minds. They are not dealing with human lives, only tallies of numbers that need adjusting.

The Germans try to suppress news of selections, but most often the camp senses its coming beforehand. Most methods of avoidance have already been monopolized by the Poles, since they always hear new information first. For those without connections or the **bread** capital to quickly organize one, there is little to be done to prepare for selection other than to examine oneself in the washroom with the others and offer each other the mutual assurance that they look healthy and will be passed over. Even for an old man who will certainly be chosen, Levi offers confident reassurance. For himself as many others, Levi is so powerless to affect that outcome that he releases himself from fear, experiencing the "great selection of October 1944 with inconceivable tranquility." The general daily hardships consume all available thought.

Levi's resignation to fate, which results in his "inconceivable tranquility" is both useful and tragic. On one hand, it allows him to pass through what seems an inhumanly cruel ordeal with relative calm. On the other hand, such resignation indicates that Levi is so detached that he no longer knows how to fear for his life. Beyond the basic instinct to survive, Levi does not seem capable of fighting. Although his mind is still working and active, his spirit has, in a way, already been defeated by the daily pains and struggling of surviving until the next meal.

On a Sunday afternoon, the order is given for all prisoners to be enclosed in their huts while an SS officer makes his way from hut to hut. In Levi's hut, the prisoners lie naked in their bunks for over an hour before their inspection. When the SS man arrives, each prisoner in turn runs naked a few yards to meet him, hands the officer a slip of paper with his number on it, and leaves. In less than a second each, with hardly a glance, the SS officer grants life or death to each prisoner by handing his number to the man on his right or the man on his left. A block of 200 prisoners is sorted this way in three or four minutes. The entire camp of 10,000 prisoners is sorted within the afternoon.

The arbitrary, haphazard nature of the selection exemplifies how much of one's survival in the camp is reliant on chance. Although without learning to adapt and to organize, one will certainly not last more than a few months, all the organizing in the world cannot protect a prisoner from simple bad luck. This suggests that along with adaptability, luck and chance play almost as critical of a role in an individual's ability to survive a cruel and lethal environment.

Once the number bearing papers have been sorted, the prisoners are allowed to return and get dressed. It seems that the man in front of Levi, though healthy and robust, was condemned, and Levi was spared. But mistakes are often made, and Levi and Alberto surmise that perhaps their cards were mixed up. In any case, Levi will live, as will Alberto. The condemned are given additional rations that evening and for the few days until they are taken to the crematorium.

The potential mix-up between Levi's card and the man in front of him painfully reinforces the dominant role that luck and chance play in one's survival. However, considering that Levi was treated in Ka-Be and is thus considered an "economically useful Jew" it is possible that he was spared from selection based upon his technical skills.

On a neighboring bunk, a Jewish prisoner named Kuhn tactlessly and enthusiastically thanks God for benevolently sparing his life, even though his bunkmate lying next to him has been condemned. Levi reflects, "If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayers."

Levi's anger at the tactlessness of another man once again demonstrates that, despite his resignation towards his own fate, he still possesses the notably human trait of sympathy, meaning he is resisting dehumanization to some degree.

CHAPTER 14. KRAUS

It is November and it has been raining for 10 days, making the prisoners miserable. Levi works in a ditch, sinking into the mud as he digs, alongside three other men. Among them is a young Hungarian named Kraus. He is a good worker, though clumsy, but he has not developed the "underground art of economizing on everything, on breath, movements, even thoughts." A siren sounds, marking the end of a day that once seemed interminable, and now no longer exists in the prisoner's minds as they march back. Time loses all meaning beyond the present in the Lager. The camp slang for "never" is "tomorrow morning."

This short chapter primarily serves to demonstrate that nothing in the camp functions as it does in the outside world, such as the passage of time or feelings of cold and hunger. This is exemplified by Kraus himself, who, though seemingly a fine young man in the outside world, seems destined for an early death in the camps. The idea of "economizing on everything" suggests that, especially for those who have lived more than the first few months in the camps, there is a hard-learned, methodical art to survival.

Levi marches back next to Kraus, who is having difficulty keeping time with the march, made worse by the fact that he is attempting in poor German to apologize for his clumsiness (he does not share any other language with Levi). Levi stops him, and in painstakingly slow and clear German, tells Kraus that he had a dream of being home in Italy, of being well-fed, warm, dry, and happy, and that Kraus was there visiting him. In this dream Levi describes them dining together and enjoying each other's company, happy and safe from the world they live in now.

Although Levi rather coldly believes that Kraus will not live long, his attempt to comfort him by telling him of a wonderful dream once again indicates that Levi has maintained a level of compassion that seems largely absent from most survivors. This again suggests that despite the dehumanizing force of the camp and the propensity of most prisoners to care only for their own needs, Levi still maintains some level of humanity.

Kraus is emotional and appreciative, making all manner of promises to see such a dream happen. But Levi observes to himself that while Kraus must have made an excellent civilian, he will not survive the Lager for long. His coming death is as "logical as a theorem." Levi did not truly have any dream about Kraus, and outside of this "brief moment," Kraus is as meaningless to Levi as everything is meaningless other than cold, hunger, and rain.

Levi's deception is both compassionate and cold, a blatant lie to ease the mind of a dying man. This once again nods to morality being relative to one's circumstances. Although Levi's dream was a calculated lie, it does provide Kraus with a brief amount of comfort and relief from the fear and pain he experiences.

CHAPTER 15. DIE DREI LEUTE VOM LABOR

The rain of November becomes winter snow, and the workers of the chemical Kommando think only of how wrong they were to hope their lives would improve in a skilled labor unit. So far, none have been chosen for the chemists' lab and the labor has been harder and more painful than what they came from. Levi and Alberto imagine they will perish this winter. 300 new arrivals from a neighboring camp describe how, although the Russian air raids have ceased, the front is approaching—one can even just barely hear the rumble of it in the distance. In response, the neighboring Lublin prison camp was "liquidated" by the German officials: all the prisoners are either burned alive or gunned down. It seems likely that such a fate will be met in Auschwitz as well.

Aside from the physical suffering of the labor camp, the constant threat of the future certainly imposes its own unique psychological suffering as well. Whether it is the selections, Russian air raids, freezing to death in the snow, or having their camp "liquidated" by the fleeing German army, death hangs over the future like a ghost, quietly asserting its presence. With this in mind, it is little wonder that prisoners tend not to speak or think of the future, but dwell only on the immediate present moment.

One morning during roll call, Alex announces that Doktor Pannwitz has finally made his decision: three chemists will be transferred to the laboratory, including Levi. Alberto congratulates him with genuine goodwill—since Levi and Alberto divide all of the resources they each gain evenly between them, a victory for one is a victory for the other. Although the Buna is practically destroyed, the Russians are a mere 50 miles away, and prisoners are being cremated at a rapid pace as neighboring camps are evacuated, rations are reduced, and diphtheria and scarlet fever have broken out in camp. Levi is going to the safety and shelter of a chemistry lab, which is a great fortune. In addition, he will be given new shirt, underpants, and a weekly shave.

The friendship between Levi and Alberto is so deep that they willingly share everything between them, fighting the prisoner's instinct to fend only for himself. This once again is a mark of humanity, signaling that both men are successfully maintaining some vestige of their capacity for love and empathy, and thereby resisting the Germans' dehumanization. This sense of humanity will only be reinforced for Levi since he will be working indoors and given new clothes and a weekly shave, all things that contribute to an individual's sense of dignity.

The three chemists nervously enter the laboratory for the first time and find that it is overwhelmingly normal and familiar, with tools they recognize and a well-regulated temperature. This is an enormous good fortune, since not only will the escape the threat of winter's cold, but there is also plenty to steal and barter for food with, meaning they will not die of hunger either. Despite the onset of the Russians, who will arrive any day, Levi and his fellows have plenty of work to do. In the evening he is still a prisoner with everyone else, but during the day he works at a desk with a notebook and a drawer. He is not beaten or threatened, and it does not even feel like work compared to the labor outside.

Once again, Levi's actions and circumstances fuel his journey towards feeling like a human being once again. Although he is still a prisoner, working as a chemist in a heated laboratory with tools and fine instruments is a far cry from the desolation and inhumanity he experienced during his first few months in the camp. Beyond simply resisting the dehumanization of the Nazis, this re-humanizing process will also help Levi to prepare to survive his final 10 days in the camp, which will be particularly arduous.

However, with this newfound tranquility, Levi feels the "pain of remembering, the old ferocious suffering of feeling myself a man again." Several young German and Polish women work in the laboratory as well, and their visible repulsion to the Häftlinge is painful, not the least because it is deserved—the prisoners smell, their faces are riddled with sores and cuts, and their clothes hang off their gaunt and hairy frames. Levi recounts, "These girls sing, like girls sing in laboratories all over the world, and it makes us deeply unhappy."

Levi's pain at slowly reclaiming his humanity suggests that, along with the other prisoners, Levi was not entirely cognizant of just how bestial and dehumanized he had become. When everyone around him is reduced to the same level of grotesque survival, it seems to take on a sense of normalcy until Levi finds himself in the presence of civilized, dignified human beings.

Levi reflects that the past year has passed quickly. One year ago he was free, a man with a family, career, and aspirations. He was a man to whom death, pain, and suffering "seemed extraneous literary things." Now, Levi thinks, "I am not even alive enough to know how to kill myself." He wishes he could explain this to one of the women, but he lacks the capacity in German, and she would either flee or simply not understand.

Levi again refers to the latent desire to share his story with someone, to explain how the awful incongruity of it all feels. Although this desire goes unanswered, it does seem that he found his outlet to share such a story through the writing and publishing of Survival in Auschwitz.

CHAPTER 16. THE LAST ONE

Christmas is approaching, and although Alberto and Levi work separately now, they still march back to the camps together each day. Their fortunes have continued to rise—Lorenzo now smuggles them several pints of soup each day, which they carry back in a zinc pot that they commissioned a tin-smith to make for them. The possession of such an item raises their social standing amongst the Häftlinge as keen organizers, and Elias, Alfred L., and even Henri constantly interact with them. On top of the soup, Alberto and Levi have both undertaken several schemes to smuggle, thieve, and invest their newfound capital and multiply their returns.

In terms of the life of a prisoner, Levi and Alberto are doing quite well for themselves, using their wits and resources to create wealth, again a notably human practice. Their pride in their own success seems reasonable and well-founded since they have managed to do things that many others could not and they are growing healthier and stronger. What will soon happen, though, suggests that Levi believes their pride to be entirely misplaced.

As Alberto and Levi are walking back to camp, having just received their daily pot of soup from Lorenzo, the prisoners are gathered into the square. Both men think it must be a roll call, but quickly realize it is in fact an execution. Although such a sight is not unusual—with men often hung for petty crimes—what is unusual is that the prisoner to be hung is an actual resistor, a fighter who played some role in the detonation of one of Birkenau's crematoriums. Somehow, the men of Birkenau, aided by this man in front of Alberto and Levi, had "found in themselves the strength to act, to mature the fruits of their hatred."

The contrast between Alberto and Levi's work to survive—which, in such an environment, arguably constitutes its own form of resistance—and this true revolutionary's work is painfully clear. Although Alberto and Levi resist the Germans' attempts to dehumanize and destroy them, their work is ultimately only for themselves. Through the contrast, Levi seems to condemn their own selfishness and weakness in their inability to truly fight their oppressors.

The gathering of prisoners is silent as an SS official makes a long speech in harsh, undiscernible German. Once he has said his piece, the condemned man cries out, "Comrades, I am the last one!" Though Levi is ashamed to admit it, no one stirs at the final heroic proclamation. The man hangs and the Jewish prisoners are forced to walk in procession past his wriggling, swaying corpse. As Levi does so, he thinks that the Russians ought to arrive now, for the last man of any strength or caliber among them is hanging from the gallows. The Germans have finally destroyed the Jewish people. In the block, Alberto and Levi cannot look each other in the eye, for they are painfully aware that although they are masterful organizers, they are still weak and defeated men. Levi admits, "We satisfied the daily ragings of hunger, and now we are oppressed by shame."

It is strange that Levi orients so much of his story around the struggle to maintain one's own humanity in the midst of their survival struggle, and yet in this chapter seems to condemn it as insignificant or even infantile. Although Levi continues in his struggle for survival and his quest to maintain his own humanity, his shame that he never truly fought colors the perception of the entire story. While the reader is not likely to view Levi as any less brave or heroic for surviving one of modern history's most grotesque evils, the author himself seems to argue that although some prisoners were able to maintain their individual humanity, the Nazis did succeed in crushing their spirit.

CHAPTER 17. THE STORY OF TEN DAYS

In January 1945, Levi comes down with scarlet fever and is placed in the infection ward of Ka-Be, which guarantees him forty days of rest and isolation. Since he has eaten well and been spared hard labor the last several months, his body is strong enough to survive both selection and his fever. Levi spends his time seldomly speaking with the other men in the ward and using his new collection of tools to make cigarette lighters, which he can sell for several rations of **bread** each. Two pleasant Frenchmen, Arthur and Charles, are also in the ward, having only arrived in the camp days before. When a Greek barber speaks of the rumors that the Russian army is nearly upon them, both men are exuberant, though those who have been in the camp longer know that such optimism is foolish.

The growth of Levi's character is obvious in his use of time in Ka-Be. When he was placed in the infirmary the in his first few months in the camp, he spent all his time sleeping and hiding from labor. Levi's current use of spare time to be industrious and earn extra bread money demonstrates that he has grown both as a prisoner and as a person, now finding opportunities to take control of his situation rather than merely submit to it. Arthur and especially Charles, though they play a brief role, will prove to be particularly important to Levi throughout the rest of the story.

A Greek doctor arrives the same afternoon and informs them that any prisoners healthy enough to march will be given several days' worth of rations, new **shoes**, and sent on a 12-mile hike with the rest of the prisoners and the German guards. Those too sick to travel would be left in Ka-Be to fend for themselves, under the care of the least sick patients. The doctor denies that the Germans will kill the patients of the ward, though he obviously thinks otherwise.

Levi's case of scarlet fever turns out to be extremely fortunate, for it keeps him from going on the forced march in which most of the prisoners die. This stroke of luck which allows him to survive once again demonstrates the strong role played by pure chance in each prisoners' struggle to survive.

Alberto comes to say goodbye to Levi through the window, ignoring the quarantine since he has already had scarlet fever in in his lifetime. Alberto has found himself a pair of leather **shoes** to walk the journey in, and Levi knows that he must find himself a pair of shoes once he is strong and able again. But now he is left in the "hands of fate." Roughly 20,000 prisoners and guards evacuate the camp on January 18, leaving some 800 prisoners in Ka-Be, 11 of whom share Levi's room. "Almost in their entirety they vanished during their evacuation," including Alberto.

Alberto's taking of a pair of leather shoes is significant since it symbolizes a change of position. Leather shoes were formerly prohibited to the Jewish prisoners, given only to camp officials or occasionally German prisoners. Now that Alberto is taking steps towards freedom and liberation, he will wear leather shoes like a man of higher status. Sadly, Levi infers that Alberto, along with most other prisoners, died on the forced march.

None but a few SS guards remain with the patients at Ka-Be to distribute final rations, and even they seem uninterested. Levi summons the strength to gather some of the blankets left behind by those who have left. In the late evening, shortly after the lights go out, an air raid strikes the camp, burning several empty buildings down. A group of prisoners who felt they were threatened by being too close to the fire beg for shelter in the infection ward, but Levi and the others barricade the door until they leave. The explosions from the air raid have broken out one of the hut's windows, and he realizes that in the morning they will have to forage for a woodstove and for food, which he relays to the Frenchmen.

Despite Levi's returning sense of humanity, his refusing entry to their hut to other prisoners suggests that in survival situations, painful decisions still need to be made. As will be seen, Levi makes efforts to take care of the people who share his hut, but he and the others cannot possibly hope to protect hundreds of ill and weary prisoners. In such a scenario, there seems to be no ideal outcome whatsoever. Once again, this suggests that morality within the camp must by necessity be circumstantial.

As he recounts the 10 days between the Germans leaving and the Russians arriving, Levi's narration switches to the style of dated diary entries. January 19: Levi wakes up with Arthur and Charles at dawn, feeling ill and weary and frightened. All the other prisoners in their hut are too weak or too frightened to rise. The three men, however, step out, finding the Lager in ruins from the air raid and from being sufficiently ransacked by the remaining prisoners. Even so, they find two sacks of potatoes left in the kitchen and an iron woodstove in an administrative office, which they manage to carry back with a wheelbarrow, as well as embers and scraps of wood to burn. Once the broken window has been sealed, the stove set up, and the heat of the fire begins to warm their hut, everyone manages to relax a bit.

The woodstove, though it was ransacked rather than purchased, is the single largest amenity that Levi or any prisoners have been allowed to possess since their entrance into the camp. Although they are mostly concerned with survival, the woodstove's presence and utility give the infection ward the sense of being a base, or even a home, upon which they slowly build. Once again, this represents another noteworthy step in Levi and the other prisoners' process of regaining their humanity and living like civilized men.

One of the prisoners who remained inside while Levi, Charles, and Arthur foraged, makes the agreed-upon proposal that each man who did not forage should give a slice of **bread** to the three who did the work. To Levi, this marks a new beginning, a symbol that the "Lager was dead," and that the survivors are beginning to transition from "Häftlinge to men again." Even so, when the light and warmth of the stove draws other prisoners from other huts, Levi and Charles deny them entry. That evening, they can hear air raids and rifles in the distance, though they think little of it. Instead, though exhausted, they are proud to have "accomplished something useful—perhaps like God after the first day of creation."

The prisoners' voluntary choice to offer those who worked an extra portion of food signifies that not only is Levi's humanity being restored, but so, too, is everyone else's. That this happens so quickly in the Germans' absence reveals just how dehumanizing their oppression was to the Jewish prisoners. Yet again, however, unable to feed or shelter all the prisoners in the camp, Levi and Charles send them away, quite possibly to their deaths. This again demonstrates the that morality, so much as it can exist in a concentration camp, is relative to circumstances.

January 20: Levi rises to light the stove in the morning, joints still aching with fever, and Arthur boils three potatoes per person for breakfast. Having remembered a trench were vegetables were buried, Levi and Charles spend their day chipping turnips out of the frozen ground with a pickaxe, as well as packets of salt and a can of water. They manage to cart back 100 pounds of food, as well as a truck battery, still with a charge, that Levi finds in a surgery ward. That evening, Levi can see through his window the tanks, trucks, and horses of the German army snaking up the road past the camp, fleeing.

Although a stash of frozen vegetables pickaxed from the ground and an old truck battery are hardly treasures, such a haul is by far the most that Levi has been allowed to possess in the year since he was first arrested by Italian Fascists. Once again, this serves as a marker of his returning humanity and the defeat of the Germans' attempt to dehumanize and destroy him. Although they nearly succeeded destroying Levi's humanity and dignity in his first few months, it is quickly returning.

January 21: Although Levi is exhausted, Charles calls him to work again in the morning. As Arthur sets whichever men of the infection ward can sit upright to peeling potatoes, Charles and head set outside to find a place in the ransacked kitchen to make some soup from turnips and cabbage. The camp is covered in frozen filth—the dysentery patients have flooded the latrines and filled every available container that could be found.

Although the Germans have left and with them, the threat of violence, the camp remains a grotesque place of suffering. The gradual disrepair of the camp, growing worse by the day, seems to be an inversion of the state of the infection ward and Levi and Charles' humanity, which is steadily on the rise.

After Charles and Levi find a suitable place and the needed equipment to cook soup, a group of prisoners once again gathers to beg for food, but Charles fends them off. However, an enterprising tailor steps forward and offers to make clothing out of scavenged wool blankets in exchange for soup, and both Charles and Levi find themselves newly equipped with heavy jackets and gloves. That evening, Levi tells the others in his hut that they should begin thinking of home again, to encourage themselves to survive.

Levi's recommendation to his comrades to begin thinking of him and using those memories as inspiration to survive again marks a transition both in Levi and the life of the Lager. While the Nazis were in control, prisoners tried not to think of home so as not to dwell on false hope. Levi's admonition suggests that, for the first time since his arrival at Auschwitz, he truly feels hopeful about their liberation and rescue.

January 22: The next morning, Levi and Charles boldly venture into one of the SS camp quarters, finding a wealth of vodka, medicine, leftover food, and magazines, which they happily carry back with them. Less than half an hour later, SS officers, apparently separated from their comrades, find 18 French prisoners eating from their stores of food in the SS dining hall, and the swiftly execute each one of them, leaving the corpses where they lay.

Levi and Charles's narrow escape from death—of which they are entirely unaware—once again reiterates the strong role of chance in one's survival. Despite all of their hard work to establish themselves and survive, such an unfortunate chance meeting with SS officers would certainly have meant death.

The camp is filling with frozen corpses, most of whom are either stacked in the yard or left lying in their bunks. Through the wall of the quarantine hut, Levi can hear the groans of the dying men in the dysentery ward. Struck with brief compassion, he drags a bowl of water and some leftover soup to them in the evening, which results in the dysentery patients shouting his name through the wall in every language, day and night. Levi recalls, "I felt like crying, I could have cursed them."

The horror of the scene Levi describes, brought on by his brief show of compassion, once again reiterates the circumstantial nature of morality. Though Levi's delivery of food follows a standard notion of human goodness, after knowing the outcome and realizing that the deaths of all the men in the dysentery ward seem unavoidable, it is easy to argue that it would have been better if Levi had not tried to show compassion at all.


In the night, a young man in the quarantine hut falls out of bed and soils himself, filling the hut with a foul stench. Charles rises, dresses himself, and then cleans the young man with straw, scrapes the floor clean with a plate, and carries the young man back to his bunk. To Levi, in the midst of such extreme exhaustion, this seems a great act of self-sacrifice.

Charles's exertion when Levi could not bring himself to rise could possibly be due to the fact that he has been in the camp for far less time than Levi, which would suggest that his sense of humanity and compassion are less beaten and repressed than Levi's.



January 23: Rumor has spread that a large cache of potatoes is buried outside the camp, beyond the barbed wire. Sometime in the morning, a group of prisoners manage to clear an opening, stamping down the barbed wire fence, and Charles and Levi are able to pass through unharmed. As they do, Levi realizes that he is free for the first time in over a year, without fences or guards keeping him prisoner or preventing his journey home. They find the potatoes, which although must be dug out with a pickaxe, are of such surplus that "nobody would die of hunger anymore." Despite this good fortune, another patient of the infection ward, sick with diphtheria, seems very close to death.

Just as life in the Lager loses much of its color and meaning beyond the instinct to survive, Levi's liberation strikes him with very little weight. After a year of the Lager's horrors, freedom seems almost underwhelming, certainly less pertinent to the day's demands than a frozen cache of potatoes. However, the fact that "nobody would die of hunger anymore" signals yet another victory over the tyranny of the Lager, which made itself felt daily through the pain of hunger.


January 24: The majority of prisoners left in Ka-Be continue to grow weaker and the number of corpses lying around the camp steadily grows. However, a hut filled with patients who were not diseased but only recovering from operations have grown healthy and strong again. They make a foraging trip to the English prisoner-of-war camp and return laden with flour, lard, and various other foods and goods. Levi, who had recently found a block of beeswax, leads the infection ward in making candles, which they trade the newly-wealthy for additional food that provides them with more nutritious than only potatoes.

Although sick and weakened, and though hundreds of men around them are dying, Levi and the men in the infection ward are once again better off than they ever were under Nazi control. Using their own ingenuity, they are able to make and trade for food that is far more adequate than what they were fed as rations. Again, the fact that the prisoners are able to so quickly improve their station once the Germans are gone reveals the extent to which the Germans oppressed them and held them in subjugation.

January 25: Ravens arrive in the camp in large numbers to pick at the corpses. In Levi's hut, a dying Hungarian named Sómogyi falls into a delirium and begins chanting the German affirmative "Jawohl" over and over again, "thousands of times." The survivors try to reassure each other that the Russians will arrive any moment now. Although they are still weak and Sómogyi's chattering is incessant, Arthur, Charles, and Levi spend their evening speaking excitedly on all manner of subjects around the stove, to the rapt attention of every other man in the hut, as the three "become men once again."

Sómogyi's delirium and repeating of the German affirmative is tragic, suggesting that the Germans had so dominated him that in his final hours all he can do is try to acquiesce to them. Meanwhile, the concept of three men sitting near a woodstove chatting the evening away is a simple one, signifying their increasing freedom from the psychological hold of the lager and their transition back to full, civilized, intelligent human beings.

January 27: Although Arthur, Charles, and Levi keep each other feeling sane and human, around them the dying survivors are reduced to a bestial state, concerned with nothing beyond immediate survival. Above them, Levi can hear small planes dog-fighting, and in the interludes, Sómogyi's "monologue." However, during the night, Levi and Arthur both hear him fall out of bed and go silent. He is dead, but there is no sense in moving him before the morning.

Despite the three friends' growing humanity, the Lager remains a fundamentally brutal and grotesque place. This is particularly emphasized by the fact that Sómogyi's corpse is simply left on the floor until daylight. Such an occurrence is unthinkable in civil society, yet seems necessary within the demands of the Lager.

January 28: The survivors of the infection ward wake to find the "Sómogyi thing" lying on the floor, but they do not want to touch him before they eat for fear of his contagion. After breakfast, while Charles and Levi are carrying Sómogyi's body out to the yard, the Russians arrive to free them from the camp. Although Sómogyi was the only man in Levi's hut to die within the 10 days between the Germans' leaving and the Russians' arriving, five more die in the Russian mobile hospital established in Auschwitz. Five, however, survive, including Arthur, Charles, and Levi. Charles and Levi write letters back and forth long after the war has ended, and Levi remarks that he hopes to "see him again one day."

Contrary to Arthur, Levi, and Charles's victorious resistance against the dehumanization of the Nazis, it seems that they entirely succeeded in dehumanizing and destroying poor Sómogyi. In his dying hours, he pledged himself to be submissive to German orders. After his death, like Null Achtzehn, even the other prisoners no longer recognize him as a man. Despite Levi and Charles's brief friendship of only a few weeks, their continued contact suggests that they found a transcendent kinship and solidarity in their shared experience of survival.

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