

Surviving the camp



There's a plethora of adjectives one could apply to the survivors of Hitler's nightmarish concentration camps during the later years of the second world war; lucky, miraculous, strong-willed, and many more. However, what one must begin to consider as they ponder what the futures for these survivors was like after liberation from the camps. Many, if not all of these poor souls were left scarred for the rest of their lives, having to live every day with the images of crematoriums, skeleton-esque human beings, and the countless other atrocities that have been burned into their minds. To have emerged from the camps alive by the war's end surely resulted on numerous factors, some of which aren't even in one's control. The story of Primo Levi and his tale of having survived one of the most terrifying eras for Jewish people in perhaps all of history reveals just what some of these factors were. From holding on to any sliver of dignity/humanity they had left in the camps to using cunning and wit to increase chances of survival, Primo prevailed against all odds. Having known that " man is bound to pursue his own ends by all possible means, while he who errs but once pays dearly" (1. 3), the persistence and desire to make it out alive fueled the determination of a man trapped in a land of fleeting trusts and moldy crusts.

Perhaps the most important contributor to the explanation how Primo survived when so many others around him did not entails holding on to the very thing the Nazi's sought to destroy within the barbed wire fences of the camps: humanity. If there's anything Hitler's concentration camps did better than extinguishing the lives of all those unfortunate enough to be imprisoned in one, it was robbing the prisoners of their humanity. Primo became keen to the inner workings and motives of these camps fairly early on in his journey,

realizing that “ if we want to keep [our names], we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains” (2. 21). Before it was too late, Primo began clinging on to every shred of his past life that he could, utilizing skills and actions done before his imprisonment that reminded him of his humanity. The prisoners began trading and bargaining with their portions of bread, something that somewhat resembled the structure of a makeshift economy in the camps. Bread became the coin of the land in place of the paper/coin currency obviously absent in that environment. One individual in particular, an ex-sergeant of the Austro-Hungarian army in World War I, served to be one of the earliest assets contributing to Primo clinging on to his humanity. Steinlauf spoke words of supreme wisdom to Primo that he’d remember so well that they’d go on to be included in his book years later. Steinlauf desperately wanted Primo to acknowledge that “[they] must polish [their] shoes, not because the regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety” (3. 41). The importance of maintaining routine order aside from the one enforced by the Nazi guards was key to keeping a level head in that hellish world. If one could clean themselves, dry off in their jackets, and even find the time to polish their shoes, then the declination of sanity would slow down drastically. While Primo is skeptical of this advice in the beginning, wondering whether or not it’d be better to simply recognize the futility of having personal rules, it’s without a doubt one of the sole reasons he escaped the war with any bit of his humanity left intact. Another fateful action Primo chose to perform was analyzing and befriendng select prisoners during his time in the camp. From having reunited with his childhood friend, Alberto, to holding down his territory in the Ka-Be medical

center with Charles and Arthur in the final days leading to their freedom, Primo almost certainly would've perished long ago if it weren't for the interactions he had with all the people he met along the way. He deemed anyone who became completely deprived from everyone he loved as being "a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint" (2. 26), therefore taking it upon himself to make sure he wouldn't become stranded there without anyone to care for. Despite having lost Alberto to the Nazi death marches as the Russians grew closer to the Auschwitz, Primo came to think so fondly of Charles and Arthur that he even went as far to say that he exchanged letters with Charles after their liberation, "[hoping] to see him again one day" (17. 22). Through the combination of tactics and friendly connection Primo developed as he adapted to life in the concentration camp, the Jewish chemist was able to keep what little humanity he had left from being viciously stripped away from him by the dehumanizing Nazi regime.

While he definitely gained a lot of the knowledge leading to his triumphant survival within the walls of his enclosure, it'd be ignorant to overlook Primo's naturally admirable intelligence he had before arriving at Auschwitz. Aside from being a formally recognized chemist in the life he lived before the war, Primo was able to analytically observe his surroundings and those around him, which resulted in the discovery of ways he could go about his day while expending the least amount of energy possible. In one particular instance, Primo recruited the aid of a man named Resnyk to help him with a task requiring the heavy lifting of wooden beams weighing nearly 175 lbs each. Shortly after meeting the fellow prisoner, Primo wasted no time taking

mental notes of the advantages to associating himself with him, labeling him as a “ good worker [whose] being taller would support the greater part of the weight” (6. 10). Levi’s natural ability to seek out the talents and usefulness that would come in handy should he need their assistance surely played an important role in his survival in Auschwitz. Touching back on his specialty in the field of chemistry as well, Primo’s choice to take the Chemical Examination put forward by German officers seeking out a Chemical Kommando for the camp gave him unparalleled legs-up over the other prisoners. Although it took awhile for the advantages of this action to finally become apparent, Primo found himself receiving better clothing at a more frequent rate, a warm workspace, and even the privilege of having a weekly shave once having secured the position (which was only earned by two other men). Using the strong mind gifted to him at birth to find ways to make his situation even just slightly more bearable undoubtedly gave Primo Levi the resources he needed to last until the Russians’ inevitable arrival at Auschwitz.

One can’t help but sit back and truly think to themselves for a minute just how incredible it is that any concentration camp prisoner made it out of Hitler’s mortifying Europe with their lives. There were a few viable reasons that could help better explain why Primo Levi survived when countless others perished mere feet away from him on a daily basis, but the most influential ones included having humanity, intelligence and even luck on his side. There’s no way Primo would’ve made it out of Auschwitz if it weren’t for a few extremely fateful events, like his meeting of a local, kind-hearted citizen named Lorenzo, who would often provide extra portions of food in

secrecy to him during the periods of air raid bombings (as the prisoners were forced to wait outside the bomb shelters during the attacks). He credits Lorenzo and his generosity for being “ one of the main reasons for [his] survival” (12. 9) by the time he and the rest of the remaining prisoners were liberated in 1945. Nevertheless, no matter what the reasoning may be for Primo having survived one of the scariest examples of unrelenting anti-semitism in modern history, it goes without saying that this man deserved none of the horrible atrocities inflicted upon him during World War II. None of the victims of Hitler’s reign of terror did, and we can only hope that their spirits have found some degree of peace in the unknown world beyond the one riddled with hate, war and conflict that humanity continues to live in today.