

# Survival in auschwitz by primo levi: hope, unity, and staying alive

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Hunger. Coldness. Abuse. Conditions of negative extremes: "...we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this..." (Levi 26). Despair. Hopelessness. Yet, the human spirit can be abundant with resilience and endurance.

Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* exposes just that. In this account, Primo Levi, an Italian Jew, writes about his experience in the Holocaust. From deportation from Italy following arrests by Italian fascists to life in the German death camp, Levi reveals the resilience in character and hope of survival that arise in the most desperate and low of situations. In his ten month duration in Auschwitz, Primo Levi learns and adapts to methods of survival—the final objective. But how was he, and others interned, able to withstand the cruelty and wretched conditions of these death camps? Primo Levi's text serves to underscore the forced compliance into the death camp lifestyle as means of survival. Through adaptability, unique and strong ties of camaraderie as in the case of the Greeks, and efforts to retain the remaining sense of humanity helped those interned in death camps such as Auschwitz, survive.

Primo Levi reveals how life in the death camp could not be questioned. One must follow the orders, live by the routine of starvation and constant beating, and hope to live another day. There was no time to question, simply act. He notes that this form of adaptability in such extreme conditions is "partly passive and unconscious, partly active...by virtue of this work, one manages...a certain degree of security in the face of the unforeseen" (Levi 56). Acting upon the required tasks meant simply obeying them. This was a

strategic act of survival as you attempt to go unseen. Perhaps causing no trouble meant no death, for some more hours. This was the case in the Ka-Be medical unit, and could be applied to outside of it. The place was in itself unfamiliar, but getting familiar with a place of such horror and violence could be a matter of life and death.

The case of the unified Greeks raises the possibility of tightknit communities amid the hopelessness that Auschwitz represented. This bond meant some more spared life for those who were a part of it. When describing them, Primo Levi notes:

Those admirable and terrible Jews of Salonica, tenacious, thieving, wise, ferocious and united, so determined to live, such pitiless opponents in the struggle for life; those Greeks who have conquered in the kitchen and in the yards, and whom even the Germans respect and the Poles fear (Levi 71).

The tragedy and sorrow of the Holocaust can cloud the bravery and endurance of those who survived. Here, it is evident that the Greeks maintained strong loyalty to one another in the quest for day-to-day survival. This method resonates to adaptability. In this case however, it becomes a means of adapting with those around you and working towards collective survival. The allegiance described was a strategic twist onto the camp's intended efforts to destroy possibilities of hope and unity.

The death camp was designed to instill despair, to dehumanize. Precisely because this was the case, an act of resistance meant not consenting to this self-deterioration that amounted to the already inhumane acts that occurred

within the confines of the barbed wires. Primo Levi was introduced to this outlook by another man in the camp, Steinlauf. He sums up what Steinlauf advised accordingly:

That precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive...and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization (Levi 41).

This counter to the attempts of the Germans to degrade the Jews and other prisoners represents a valiant act of preserving dignity, and much beyond that: humanity. It is incredible; even in this circumstance of horror, protecting their essence, specifically spiritual, upheld their morale and hopes for survival. Their refusal to consent to the effects of the dehumanization represented a power that they could use to their advantage in maintaining alive.

The death camps embodied just that: death. Nonetheless, Primo Levi's account in *Survival in Auschwitz* explores varying attempts of survival that worked in fostering what the death camps strove to dismantle: unity, hope, resilience. Through his own experience living in Auschwitz, Primo Levi allows the reader to understand the conditions that led to these counteracts of endurance. Daily quests for food, clothes, and survival was an incessant worry. Yet by preserving their humanity through close bonds and hope, they worked to "remain alive, not to being to die" (Levi 41).