

In memory of
auschwitz



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Survival in Auschwitz is a memoir written by Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish survivor of the Holocaust who was sent to and worked in the Auschwitz-Monowitz labor camp during the later years of World War II. Levi's memoir is significant for its contributions to the historical record of the Holocaust, as well as providing a profound personal account through his memories of life in Auschwitz. While the memoir is successful in documenting part of the Holocaust's history and Levi's memories, it is evident that Levi's memoir tells us more about the memory of the Holocaust due to the gaps within the memoir's historical contribution, memory's effect on Levi's writing process, as well as the memoir's impact on memory communities.

When attempting to reconstruct the past, there are two means through which this can be achieved: History and memory. The former refers to structured learning about the past by using facts and evidence-supported documentation, most commonly through primary sources which are written or produced by people who were present at the time of the historical event in question. Conversely, memory refers to reliving or understanding historical events by means of others' recollections and personal experiences, which are passed down and transmitted through memory communities into collective memory. This is acknowledged by Eviatar Zerubavel in "Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past". As memory is shared within various social groups known as "mnemonic communities" (Zerubavel 289) and stored within physical and virtual locations known as "social sites of memory" (Zerubavel 291), our memory would thus extend much further than what we personally have experienced, allowing us to learn more about history through the memories of others. Examples of this, in terms of

learning about the events of the Holocaust, are historical poetry such as Levi's " Epitaph" (Levi 11) and testimonies from survivors from what Annette Wieviorka calls " the era of the witness" (Wieviorka XV). This includes the works of Elie Wiesel, who writes because he believes he " owes the dead [his] memory" (Wiesel 16), and Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*.

With regards to the memoir's historical contribution, it is undeniable that Levi's accounts provide an in-depth view of life as both a prisoner and labor camp worker in Auschwitz. Every chapter explains a different aspect of how he eventually managed to survive living in camp Monowitz, ranging from his deportation and arrival to living under the prison hierarchy, the inner workings of the black market, as well as surviving selection multiple times, before finally getting liberated by the Soviet Army. All of such are experiences unique to him, but still serve as first-hand documentation for the historical record of the Holocaust. As Doris Bergen mentions in *War & Genocide*, Levi's testimonies on the Holocaust were " some of the most insightful reflections on that event ever written" (Bergen 180). This is true based on how Levi's words match up with the factual evidence of occurrences during the final years of World War II, such as how he had begun his memoir by describing his " good fortune" (Levi 9) to have been deported to Auschwitz in 1944, and Bergen states in *War & Genocide* that the Germans had personally deported the Italian Jewish population " beginning in 1943" (Bergen 180).

However, Bergen then follows up with the fact that " most of the Italian Jews murdered in the Holocaust died in 1944 or early 1945" (Bergen 180). This already shows a gap within Levi's accounts as he clearly was not part of the

majority who died, whether it was in the gas chambers or otherwise, like the “ women ... children ... old men” (Levi 20) from the freight trains whom he never saw again. In addition to this, Levi’s experiences in relation to the Holocaust as documented through his memoir do not begin until 1944, while anti-Jewish aggression from the Reich Government takes place long before Levi is deported and involves experiences other than being sent to concentration camps, like the various pogroms that occur across Eastern Europe and the ghettoization of Polish Jews from “ late 1939 to early 1949” (Bergen 111). Despite its historical accuracy and detailed accounts of life in Auschwitz, Levi’s experiences are not representative of the fate that most Holocaust victims faced, as such victims faced a wide range of outcomes that did not necessarily result in being sent to Auschwitz, let alone surviving life there. Thus, his memoir leaves more gaps than it fills in terms of our historical knowledge of the Holocaust, and is therefore comparably more telling of his memory of it than its history.

Similarly, *Survival in Auschwitz* can be viewed as more memory-based due to the impact of Levi’s memory on the writing of his memoir. Having been part of the surviving minority of Holocaust prisoners and having written this memoir “ following his return to Italy in the autumn of 1945” (Thomson 142), Levi is fully aware of the outcome of World War II and feels “ oppressed by shame” (Levi 150) and guilt for having survived. As opposed to other similarly autobiographical primary sources that may have been produced by other concentration camp prisoners, Levi uses his memoir to relive his experiences in Auschwitz, equipped with the knowledge that he survives the entire ordeal and lives to tell the tale. Content-wise, his memoir would then

be vastly different from an account that was written as the events of the Holocaust were unfolding, thus altering how he would have viewed and reflected on his experiences rather than capturing his immediate, unknowing responses. Wieviorka also explains in the introductory chapter of *The Era of the Witness* that historians treat testimonies “with considerable mistrust” (Wieviorka XIII), only very occasionally using them to build a historical narrative as such accounts are rarely unbiased or impartial (Wieviorka XIV). With this in mind, in addition to Levi’s awareness of the outcome of World War II and feelings of remorse towards his own fate, *Survival in Auschwitz* hence cannot be used as factual historical evidence, as it primarily documents Levi’s memories of Auschwitz and lacks neutrality or objectivity in the expressed opinions.

Furthermore, Levi’s motivations for writing his memoir discredit it as a historical source as well. Wiesel, also a Holocaust survivor who feels guilty for having lived on, writes to honor the dead, because “he owes nothing to the living, but everything to the dead” (Wiesel 16). His shame towards being able to enjoy a post-Holocaust future while many innocent people—old and young—perished is echoed by Levi, who chose to write for the sake of his “interior liberation” (Levi 9) in a near-therapeutic approach to coping with his experiences. What’s more is his acknowledgement that his memoir “adds nothing” (Levi 9) to what readers already know about the Holocaust’s history, its purpose is to formulate a study of the human mind instead from a sociological perspective. Though Levi raises an astute comparison between the Lager and “a gigantic biological and social experiment” (Levi 87), documenting history relies on facts, rather than aiming at understanding it

from other social aspects, or “ having fun in writing and at amusing [his] prospective readers” (Roth 183).

Another way in which memory impacted Levi’s writing process is his decision to “ write his book backwards” (Thomson 147), “ in order of urgency” (Levi 10). By deciding to write whichever chapter he considered more or most important, Levi is able to develop more careful, proselike descriptions and turn his memoir into a “ teeming, intensely literary work of great complexity” (Thomson 148), which is another feature rarely found in other historical sources. Within the fragmented order in which *Survival in Auschwitz* was written, Levi also makes a number of allusions to famous works of Italian literature, namely the chapter entitled “ The Canto of Ulysses” in which he attempts to recite from Dante’s “ The Divine Comedy”. This reference to *Inferno* and Dante’s journey through Hell eventually becomes representative of Levi’s own journey in Auschwitz, showing how he viewed his experiences through a literary scope. Therefore, *Survival in Auschwitz* tells us more about the memory of the Holocaust based on Levi’s unique takes on the psychological significance of this historical event, none of which aid historians in rebuilding its historical narrative.

Finally, the impact of Levi’s memoir on the collective memory of the Holocaust plays an immense role in Holocaust remembrance. As he brings up in the Chapter 5 dream sequence of *Survival in Auschwitz*, his sister and her friend are just two of the numerous listeners who have gathered to listen to the story he’s telling, this dream that is also his friend Alberto’s “ and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone” (Levi 60). This shows his intent to share his story to those beyond the sphere of other survivors, allowing

him to tell his story first to strangers on the Milan-Turin express train, then to his sister, before finally reaching the general public (Thomson 144-45), successfully expanding the collective memory with his words alone. While his storytelling skills were applauded by his listeners, he did not encounter such warm reactions when he put his words to print. In his search for a publisher, he faced multiple rejections from both American and Italian publishing houses (Thomson 155-57), halting his hopes of reaching a wider international audience with his memoir. He was even rejected by a Jewish-Protestant publishing business as “ the moment was not right” (Thomson 157). During his interview with Daniel Toaff on Italian State TV, Levi recalls speaking with a Polish lawyer who translated his answers for the passers-by around them. Levi’s answer regarding his identity was altered, so he was a newly-freed political prisoner instead of being an Italian Jew. When asked, the lawyer reasoned that “ it [was] best for [him]; Poland is a sad country” (Back to Auschwitz).

From this, it is clear that Levi’s prepublished story was capable of contributing to collective memory on a small scale, only reaching a global scale once it was officially published. However, even so, the memoir’s original title of *If This Is a Man* was changed to *Survival in Auschwitz* for the American release (Roth 181), so as to promote a new message of strength and survival rather than maintain its psychological implications.

Subsequently, Levi became a “ national monument” (Thomson 141) in Italy, a member in the public eye who received opportunities for both written (Roth; Thomson) and televised (Back to Auschwitz) interviews, valued for the experiences he had and shared. Hence, despite the challenges Levi faced

and the compromises he had to go through in order to bring his story to the public eye, the great influence of *Survival in Auschwitz* is still highly evident and allowed more people worldwide to share in his memories of the Holocaust.

In conclusion, Levi's interpretation of the Holocaust implies a deeper meaning behind its events, one that's more rooted in the recesses of the human mind. As Thompson points out, "no other work conveys the unique horror of the Nazi genocide more directly and profoundly, or interrogates our recent moral history so incisively" (Thompson 142). Rather than simply looking at his experiences in Auschwitz from a shallower, more literal point of view, Levi suggests studying it with a basis of psychology and morality, and to take it "as a sinister alarm-signal" (Levi 9). Thus, he would disagree with Wiesel's statement that the Holocaust cannot be understood and to write about it is to "warn the reader that he will not understand either" (Wiesel 18), taking on the opposite viewpoint instead. Chapters 8 and 9 in Levi's memoir, in which he discusses the Lager's black market and the two main categories of men—the drowned and the saved, are indicative of his "intense wish to understand" (Roth 180) and his view that the Holocaust was a social experiment conducted to determine "how much of our ordinary moral world could survive" (Levi 86) in the face of dehumanization and the struggle to stay alive. "Auschwitz was the catalyst that turned Levi into a writer" (Thomson 159), and it is because of this that Levi wrote a memoir as potent as *Survival in Auschwitz* and, while he could not provide all the answers to this question on the strength and longevity of human morality, it is through his memories that he invites us to form our own psychological

judgement of this event and develop our own memory of the Holocaust as well.