

The struggle of prisoners in survival in auschwitz by primo levi

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Primo Levi's memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, paints a vivid and horrifying picture of the life of a prisoner in Auschwitz during World War Two. The description of everyday life consisted of mental, emotional and physical struggle. Prisoners who entered the camp had everything stripped from them. Upon arrival, families were separated, heads were shaved, clothes were stripped, personal belongings were discarded and names were replaced with a series of numbers. Mass genocide took place, millions died. Those who lived through the Holocaust relied on distraction, compassion and hope for their survival.

Those in the camp worked almost every day from dusk till dawn, performing demanding manual labor. But perhaps the most painful and devastating physical struggle was one of thirst. Starvation and dehydration contributed to physical torture of the prisoners. Levi's physical trauma can be seen in the following quote, " We have a terrible thirst. The weak gurgle of the water in the radiators makes us ferocious; we have had nothing to drink for four days. But there is also a tap—and above it a card which says that it is forbidden to drink as the water is dirty. Nonsense. It seems obvious that the card is a joke, ' they' know that we are dying of thirst and they put us in a room, and there is a tap, and Wassertrinken Verboten. I drink and I incite my companions to do likewise, but I have to spit it out, the water is tepid and sweetish, with the smell of a swamp." (Primo Levi, *Survival In Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 22) Levi's physical pain translates into a mental struggle, for he is extremely thirsty and tempted by the forbidden tap. He knows not the drink from it, but reasonably does so anyway. To him, it is illogical to have what seems to be a perfectly suitable water supply

labeled 'off limits'. It is almost as if the water tap was placed in such a spot to torment the disadvantaged. Levi learns that he can no longer apply logic or reason to his situation, he has no control over his wellbeing. This concept of dependence is hard for him to comprehend at first. Levi comes to realize that his physical struggle is just as painful as his mental struggle.

For well over a year, Levi is forced to endure unimaginable suffering. In the camp, Levi and other prisoners are beaten, starved and worked without limitation. This physical pain had a severe effect on one's mental health, "Dawn came on us like a betrayer; it seemed as though the new sun rose as an ally of our enemies to assist in our destruction." (Levi, *Survival In Auschwitz*, 16). The rising sun is usually a beacon of hope, it universally symbolizes a new day, a fresh start and a clean slate. However, for Levi and others in the camp, this was not the case. In the book, Levi describes the sun as if it too only existed to shed light on the pain and suffering of the prisoners. This reflects Levi's mental struggle for an optimistic view in a world where even the most objective of things seem to be against him.

The physical struggle of life at Auschwitz was demanding, but what gets overlooked in most textbooks and classrooms, is the ever so slightly more demanding mental strength needed to survive. Levi comes to a philosophical realization, "Sooner or later in life everyone discovers that perfect happiness is unrealizable, but there are few who pause to consider the antithesis: that perfect unhappiness is equally unattainable. The obstacles preventing the realization of both these extreme states are of the same nature: they derive from our human condition which is opposed to everything infinite. Our ever-

insufficient knowledge of the future opposes it: and this is called, in the one instance, hope, and in the other, uncertainty of the following day. The certainty of death opposes it: for it places a limit on every joy, but also on every grief. The inevitable material cares oppose it: for as they poison every lasting happiness, they equally assiduously distract us from our misfortunes and make our consciousness of them intermittent and hence supportable.” ((Levi, *Survival In Auschwitz*, 17) Levi attempts to come to terms with his situation, but comes to realize, logically, that true happiness is unattainable within the camp. Likewise, he thinks that, perfect unhappiness is also unattainable. He finds comfort in the idea that it's impossible to be completely miserable, it gives him hope. Although Levi lives what seems to be a miserable life, he always finds something to keep him going. The physical pain he experiences can at least distract him from the genocide around him.

Distraction of any kind was necessary for Levi's survival. Sometimes, self-inflicted pain was the only distraction that was affordable, “ After fifty steps I am at the limit of what a person is theoretically able to support: my knees bend, my shoulder aches as if pressed in a vice, my equilibrium is in danger. At every step I feel my shoes sucked away by the greedy mud, by this omnipresent Polish mud whose monotonous horror fills our days. I bite deeply into my lips; we know well that to gain a small, extraneous pain serves as a stimulant to mobilize our last reserves of energy.” ((Levi, *Survival In Auschwitz*, 67) Levi intentionally inflicts pain on himself, in efforts to distract himself from the demanding and dreadful haul. While it seems

counterintuitive, he does indeed find relief at least for a moment. It is a sad truth and a concept hard to grasp, but sometimes, the only thing that distracts one from a painful reality is shock of a lesser pain, one that is more tolerable. At least he can control that.

Levi believes that survivors have responsibilities within the camp. One of the most profound experiences he has is with an Italian bricklayer, Lorenzo.

Unlike Levi, Lorenzo is not a prisoner, but a civilian worker. Lorenzo risks a lot in helping Levi. He illegally gives Levi bread and soup, and demands absolutely nothing in return. This is extremely abnormal because for most at Auschwitz, it is every man for himself. To obtain anything extra, one would have to trade in an underground market. Lorenzo's illegal actions give Levi a glimpse of hope. He says that Lorenzo's 'humanity was pure and uncontaminated' and that "thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man." (Levi, *Survival In Auschwitz*, 112) Lorenzo's actions reminded Levi that compassion still exists and that hope for compassion propelled Levi's mental stability. Levi was completely dehumanized, he was stripped of everything. He forgot that he was human, he forgot that compassion and love and happiness existed. Lorenzo was a narrow beam of light, in a dark desperate tunnel. Levi believes that compassion for others is critical in maintaining sanity. Personally, I agree with Levi, in that compassion is necessary in a world of pain and suffering. As long as compassion exists, mankind and all things good will prevail.

In conclusion, *Survival in Auschwitz*, tells a sad story about one of the biggest stains in the historical fabric of mankind. Levi's perseverance and

strength is apparent throughout the story. In times of darkness, when hope is lost and there seems to be no end in sight, compassion for others can lift ones spirit, and maybe even carry them to survival.