

# Primo levi's personal experience in survival in auschwitz

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Primo Levi's Survival in Auschwitz revealed the cruel ruthless torture that occurred daily in one of the most famous concentration camps - Auschwitz. His personal story revealed the harsh reality of survival and the endless struggle to hold on to any form of humanity. Those brought to Auschwitz were dehumanized, starved, got sick, and worked in harsh conditions until they died. Primo Levi's physical and psychological survival depended on various factors: luck, kindness, adaptation, and taking whatever opportunities needed to survive.

Luck is one of the main reasons why Levi survives physically from this horrific event. Right from the beginning, when he was being transported to the camp or Lager, Levi was not picked as part of the group that goes to the death camp. Out of the 650 people that were being transported to Auschwitz with Levi aboard, only 96 men and 29 women were chosen as 'fit' enough to work. Levi was one of them. From these numbers alone, he could have died at the beginning of this moment in his life since the odds were against him. With the extremely fast-pace of men and women being picked as "fit" or "unfit," Levi was simply lucky enough to be picked as 'fit.' However, despite being lucky enough to survive this first obstacle, he was then tested to survive in the third camp, Auschwitz-Buna.

Other lucky moments that led to Levi's physical survival occurred before and during his short time in Ka-Be. Before Levi was admitted into Ka-Be, he was paired to work with Null Achtzehn or 018. Levi was considered a weak man and was often paired with Null Achtzehn who wasn't particularly weak, but no one else wanted to work with him for various reasons (Levi, 43). This is

another moment of luck; it was because of being paired with this man, Levi received a foot injury. Levi's foot injury was enough to stop him from being able to work, but was not life threatening. This allowed him to stay in the Ka-Be for a couple months. This was absolutely necessary for Levi's survival. The time he used to rest in the Ka-Be was the time needed to adjust to life in the Lager. There was little food going around, and he was being worked to death. Adjusting to his new life was important in allowing him to learn the rhythm and the strategies to prolong his life. So it was sheer luck that working with Null Actzehn led to that injury which gave him time to adjust, rest, eat, recover, and stay warm. By being in the Ka-Be, it reduced the chances of him getting hurt in more serious/life-threatening ways. It kept him alive physically. It was also possible that working with another person other than Null Actzehn would have led to Levi working himself to death, or he could have caught a deadly disease while working in the constant cold. Levi was also fortunate to have survived during his time in Ka-Be. During his rest, there was a selection process there. A healthy man was picked to die instead of Levi. The SS man picked a man named Schmulek for death even though Levi and an even sicker man was in a bunk next to him. There was absolutely nothing that Levi could have done to create this moment to keep himself alive. He was lucky again, and it led to his survival.

One of the luckiest moments for Levi that also allowed him to survive this horrifying event was when he contracted scarlet fever. As Levi was recovering from the fever in Ka-Be, Alberto and other healthy men left the camp on a march while many of the sick men were left behind. Although Levi

does not explicitly say Alberto died along with the healthy men, he did say “perhaps someone will write their story one day” which indicated that they died since they are not writing their own stories (Levi, 155). If scarlet fever didn't hit Levi at the time it did, it was likely he would have left on the march with his best friend, Alberto. It was also very possible that he would have died alongside the other men whether it is from starvation, sickness, or simply shot for whatever reason. With some time to recover from his illness, Levi lives long enough to leave the camp and be rescued by the Russians.

Life in the camp was more than physically cruel, it causes massive psychological damage as the people are dehumanized and treated as livestock. Luck may be a significant factor in saving Levi physically, but it was kindness that led to his psychological survival. There were a couple moments of kindness towards Levi that helped him continue living. Kindness was rare in Auschwitz since many were not willing to waste energy on helping others and worried about their self-preservation. One of the first instances of kindness occurred near the beginning of Levi's time in the camp. Levi meets Schlome, a young boy, who tells him not to drink the water because it makes people's belly 'Geschwollen,' or swell up (Levi, 31). He even hugs Levi at the end of their interaction. This is the first instance where Levi spoke about someone caring about another person or being kind. It helped Levi hold on to hope and humanity which allows him to continue on with surviving. The way the camp is set up, it breaks up any form of group mentality or cooperation so that everyone feels the need to fend for

themselves. It is the small acts of kindness that helped Levi continue the grueling life in the Lager.

The greatest moment of kindness that Levi experiences is from a civilian worker named Lorenzo. Lorenzo brought Levi food rations every day for six months, wrote and sent postcards to Italy for him, and more, while never asking for anything in return. This grand act of kindness saves Levi psychologically. Every day, Levi is continuously crushed by the camp's system where he and many others lose hope of leaving the camp and believes death is near. Most people in the camp are also reluctant to help anyone else and are focused on their own survival. Therefore, kindness is not common in Auschwitz. By meeting someone who is kind and good, Levi remembers the good in humanity. Levi even claims, "it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today" and goes on to say that Lorenzo's presence as a good, uncorrupted, and pure person is worth surviving for (Levi, 121). Lorenzo is a beacon of hope for Levi; Levi sees humanity as life itself. Lorenzo helps Levi realize that he and the prisoners have buried their humanity over time. It is the recognition that they are still men and humans that gives them the will to live on. Lorenzo saved Levi psychologically as Levi gradually remembers that he is still a man.

Adapting to the camp and taking whatever opportunities to survive was another way Primo Levi survived physically. Adaptation by learning quickly about the daily camp life was absolutely necessary for survival. Levi described all the useful things he learned: how to reply to questions, how to use all resources like using the wire to tie up shoes or use rags to wrap

around their feet, and more (Levi, 33). By learning new tricks, tactics, and to use everyday resources in other possible ways, he adapts to life in the camp. Having wired up shoes can mean the difference of working with covered toes or bare foot in the snow. So understanding how to expand the use of resources can be life or death. Another moment of adaptation for Levi involves food rations. Food, resources, and utensils are like currency in the camp. Levi learns when not to trade for resources/keep his rations or trade them. This is another level of adaptation because if he strictly followed the rules of the camp, only ate what was given, and worked hard, he would not have survived Auschwitz. He would have died early-on like many others, and since the camp is a test of survival, Levi needed to break the rules and do whatever means necessary to live even if it was considered "illegal."

A great opportunity for Levi, which prolonged his life, was becoming a chemical specialist. He took the chemical examination and luckily, he recalls his education and passes the test. Because Levi was working in the laboratory, he was saved from working in the harsh environment outside. Being indoors, he is warm and doesn't have to worry about getting sick or receive life threatening injuries. Levi is also given more food and is put in new clothes which help him regain his humanity and identity as a man. Because he took the opportunity to be in this new position, it saved him from being worked to death.

Many people did not last more than three months in the camp, but Levi managed to survive longer. Since many individuals died soon after the moment they arrived, those in the camp did not care for helping others and

worried about themselves. This makes it even harder to survive in Auschwitz. Levi, however, did survive it because he was mainly lucky for the most part. The injured foot helped him avoid hard labor in freezing temperatures as he rested in the Ka-Be and had time to adjust to life in the camp. Luckily, even the timing of an illness spared him from death near the end of the book. Kindness was another significant factor that saved himself psychologically where it helped him remember the good in humanity and that it was something to live for. Lastly, adapting and taking certain opportunities helped him survive as he was able to work in the lab away from deathly conditions outside, steal materials, and trade these materials for extra food. All of these events led to his survival both mentally and physically.