The Drowned and the Saved Study Guide

The Drowned and the Saved by Primo Levi

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Drowned and the Saved presents a thematic treatment of the Holocaust, revealing the how it is remembered, forgotten, and stereotyped by surviving victims, the perpetrators, and subsequent generations. Survivor Primo Levi relates how to very few live to tell their stories and unmasks the true depths of Nazi evil.

Survivors' stories are the basis for understanding the Nazis' "final solution," the physical evidence having been largely destroyed to make it all appear fictitious. The stories, however, have limitations as historical sources. One of these is that both victims' and perpetrators' "Memory of the Offense"over time become stylized and stereotyped, for very different motivations. Most listeners want there to be stark black/white, good/bad, but the Lagers are a vast "Gray Zone," where almost every survivor has some degree of guilt as a victim-collaborators, and the oppressors are not uniformly evil. All prisoners in and after the Lager feel "Shame," having been diminished by being forced to live at an animal level, without emotions, and with their moral yardstick changed. "Communicating," pictures how people from across Europe and of all cultural levels are thrown together in a state of chaos and coercion in the Lagers and have to learn a special brand of German to survive.

"Useless Violence," depicts how the Third Reich does not carry out the "final solution" in an "economical" way, but makes sure that every detail contributes to the victims' collective agony. "The Intellectual in Auschwitz," tells the story of Hans Mayer/Jean Améry, and presents his and Levy's generally consistent views on the pros and cons of being an intellectual in an atmosphere like the Lager. Non-intellectuals seem to have it easier because they do not search for a why, and believers have a better chance of survival because they look beyond the current hell. "Stereotypes," sets straight why audiences' inevitable questions about escape, rebellion, and avoiding capture "beforehand" are romantic and unrealistic. Levi wonders, in the nuclear age, why do Europeans not flee to the regions that might avoid destruction?

Finally, "Letters from Germans," summarize the limited but heartfelt response to the German translation of his Survival in Auschwitz. This closing chapter helps illustrate much of what he has said about memory, guilt, and communication. The Conclusion suggests the dangers of new generations losing interest in the Holocaust and risking the rise of another Hitler.

Preface

Preface Summary and Analysis

People hear vaguely about Nazi annihilation camps in 1942, as the tide of war turns, but the system seems so vast as to be unbelievable. This is as the Nazis hope. Evidence is suppressed incompletely, and the ruins admit no other purpose but to eliminate all trace of atrocities. Survivors are kept from telling their secrets, and postwar Germans collectively suffer "willed ignorance"—the slave labor system is too integral a part of the German economy to allow this. Survivor's stories are the major source for reconstructing what happens, but they must be read critically, for survivors lack an overall perspective. Most are the "privileged," whose status affects objectivity. The best observers are political prisoners. Forty years after liberation, much remains to be explored. Only recently have complete data been available, while memories blur and grow stylized. Only first-arrival impressions seem to be universal. Among the horrors of history, the Lagers are unique and cannot be dismissed as belonging to "another time."

Chapter 1, The Memory of the Offense

Chapter 1, The Memory of the Offense Summary and Analysis

Human memory is not set in stone. Eyewitnesses rarely agree. Trauma, competing memories, repression, and blockage augment normal aging. Retelling stories freshens memories but also leads to stereotyping, crystallizing, and adorning. Recalling trauma is itself traumatic and humans avoid fresh pain, pushing memories deep to alleviate guilt. Those who have inflicted pain deserve to suffer, while the sufferers do not; both are trapped by memories. Those who have been tortured are never again at ease with the world and oppressors remain what they have been.

Nazis confessions in court, interviews, and memoirs show common motivations and justifications: superiors, upbringing, and an environment of fear are to blame. This cannot be dismissed as "bad faith," because few people have "mental clarity." Some lie outright, but more fabricate a "convenient reality," substituting less painful, invented memories for repugnant horrors. With each telling it seems truer, and when polished to coincide with accepted history, is more readily believed As time passes, convenient truth is perfected. There is no other way that Louis Darquier de Pellepoix could deny evidence of his part in deportations and gas chambers. Eichmann and Höss are more subtle, offering the classic militiaman defense: indoctrination has left them no ability to decide, so they are not responsible and cannot be punished. This is not mere impudence. The modern totalitarian state does exert frightful control through propaganda, limiting information, and terror, but in a mere 12 years, the pressure is not irresistible. Eichmann and Höss are born before the Third Reich is truly authoritarian and join the Nazi party opportunistically. They later rework the past slowly and not methodically and believe what they create. When guilt is suppressed by claiming "I don't remember," it is often a "fossilized lie," a formula, often on advise of defense lawyers. Nazi commanders protect the consciences of those assigned to dirty work by alcohol and euphemisms, deceive victims to limit panic, and control opinion in the public and army. Hitler's biographers agree that after Stalingrad he denies truth not only to Germany but to himself and dies a deluded gambler.

When victims' memories drift, fraud is not a factor. They have no guilt but feel shame and their memories are filtered. They skim over painful episodes and dwell on moments of respite. Dante's Count Ugolino fits everyone's tendency to avoid memories of illness. Distortion can occur during the event. Levi's friend Alberto at Auschwitz is critical of those who console themselves and others with illusions, until his father is selected for the gas chamber. Thereafter, he clings to any other possibility. Alberto disappears in 1945, his family invents happy scenarios for his whereabouts. Levi is writing more about "considerations" than distant memories, substantiating his data against an imposing, consistent literature, and does his best not to let his memory drift in the anecdotes he includes.

Chapter 2, The Gray Zone

Chapter 2, The Gray Zone Summary and Analysis

Survivors simplify the past for others to understand—stark we/they, friend/enemy, good/evil divisions—but history is complex. SS ritual dehumanizes newcomers and veterans treat them as competitors. Most survivors come from the tiny privileged minority who get more food. Privilege defends and protects privilege. Privilege is born and spreads where power is in few hands, and power tolerates a zone where masters and servants diverge and converge. Collaboration springs from the need for auxiliaries to keep order as German power is overtaxed, and the desire to imitate the victor by giving orders. Individual motivations are many, and collaborators may be judged only by those who have resisted such coercion. One may absolve those who are heavily coerced and minimally guilty: functionaries who suffer with the masses but get an extra half-liter of soup for innocuous "corporate" jobs. Less easy to excuse are those who by skill or luck become Kapos (chiefs) of labor squads, barracks, etc. Most range from "the mediocre to the execrable," allowed to wield power as violently as they wish (until 1943, when workers cease to be expendable).

The Lager is a microcosm of totalitarianism, where power flows from above cannot be controlled from below. Many Kapos are common criminals or political prisoners. Later, Jews see it as their only escape from the "final solution." Sadists are not common but are feared. Confusing victims and murderers through complicity is wrong, but there are people willing to compromise. Since the Lagers draw people from across Europe and from all social classes, one cannot expect them all to be saints and stoics. Most die quickly of deprivation. Survivors are just lucky.

The extreme case of collaboration is the Sonderkommandos (SK), who do the dirty work with new arrivals, the gas chambers, and the ovens. The SS recruit them right off the train, teaches them to view fellow Jews as subhuman enemies, and temporarily treats them as colleagues. Thus, the sub-race is made complicit. The SK are strictly segregated, but rumors about their tasks circulate and prisoners speculate on what it is like to be so debased. SKs go crazy the first day or get accustomed, and alcohol is plentiful. Combining pragmatism and psychology—and shifting guilt to the victims—is Nazism's "most demonic crime." A squad clearing the gas chamber finds a 16-year-old girl alive and hides her, knowing that she (like they) must die. Compassion and brutality can coexist and compassion can elude logic. Muhsfeld of the SS has an underling kill her. Levi cannot imagine Muhsfeld being spared hell like the vicious old woman in The Brothers Karamazov, for giving an onion to a beggar, but still he is in the gray zone. Some members of the SK refuse to work or mutiny and are killed, and many commit suicide, but no SK kills with his own hands. No one dares judge without first imagining life in a ghetto, a sealed boxcar, and the inferno. Many tell survivors that they would not have survived a day—but they cannot know that. No one can foresee his or her own behavior, so judgment must be suspended on the SK.

The same applies to judging Chaim Rumkowski, President of the Lodz Ghetto, a megalomaniac dictator but good administrator who orates in the style of Hitler and considers himself a messiah. Rumkowski either stands up for his brother and accompanies him to Auschwitz, or is nearly rescued by Hans Biebow, his trading partner, but the Nazis renege. Only an addict can appreciate the intoxication of power. All humans, when dazzled by power and prestige, forget that they are fragile, living inside a walled ghetto, surrounded by death and near the waiting train.

Chapter 3, Shame

Chapter 3, Shame Summary and Analysis

Few survivors feel at Liberation the happiness depicted in literature and the movies, for most are too surrounded by tragedy, exhausted, and alone. All humans know that anguish whose cause cannot be labeled. The shame and guilt that many feel are absurd but real, and only those who do something extraordinary are beyond the feeling. For instance: Levi's innocuous Kapo is replaced by one who beats not as incentive, warning, or punishment, but simply to hurt and humiliate. Within a week, he disappears as some prisoner in the Work Office switches his registration number to the to-be-gassed list.

Discomfort over re-acquired freedom is different for each, but all feel diminished by having lived at an animal level, without emotions and with their moral yardstick changed by filth, promiscuity, and destitution. All steal, all forget country, culture, family, past, and planned future. Suicides are rare before Liberation, because suicide is non-instinctive, prisoners are too busy dying to think about death, and expiation for sin is constant. Guilt comes from not doing enough to oppose the system or from failing to resist. Rationally, there is little to be ashamed of, but almost all feel guilty about failing to help others, although survival depends on putting oneself first.

On a hot August day in 1944, Levi's squad is clearing rubble after air raids when he comes upon a pipe with a spigot containing fresh water. Thirst brings more torment than hunger and there is no drinking water in camp. Levi must decide to drink the full liter at once, drink it in increments, share it with Alberto, or share it with the squad. He shares with Alberto. Daniele sees them lying down and guesses what they are doing. After Liberation, he confronts them, based on the "civilian" moral code. Some are ashamed to be alive when another—particularly someone worthier—dies. One may do nothing to usurp the other and still feel guilt. Everyone is his brother's Cain.

After his return, Levi is visited by a religious friend who insists that his survival is an act of Providence—even though Levi believes less in God than before Auschwitz. Levi's mission is to bear witness by writing. It seems monstrous that not the best but the selfish, violent, and insensitive survive. Friends die not despite their valor but because of it. Survivors are a tiny minority, the true witnesses being mute, submerged, and write on their behalf, having seen death close up, but not experienced it. Psychoanalyzing survivors is ludicrous. Prisoners are beyond "neuroses," having touch the "tohu-bohu" (Gen. 1.2) of an empty universe when the spirit of God and man is absent—unborn or extinguished. The vaster shame is that of the world that ignores the tolling of John Donne's bell. Most Germans learn not to see, hoping that this spares them complicity. Those in the Lagers are submerged in a sea of pain that proves the evil of the human species. It is less likely that the factors creating a Nazi Germany will converge than that the nuclear apocalypse will occur.

Chapter 4, Communicating

Chapter 4, Communicating Summary and Analysis

When people wish to communicate, they usually find ways, but in the 1970s, "incommunicability" is proposed: humans are monads capable only of truncated messages destined to be misunderstood. Discourse is seen as a veil over existential silence. This theory is biologically and socially false: humans speak; non-humans do not. Refusing to communicate brings angst. Survivors experience this in a particular way. When people complain about cold, hunger, or fatigue, survivors spontaneously think, "What do you know?" but cannot get the reality across.

Tourists make a game of understanding; immigrants receive help in adjusting to cultural transplantation, but in the Lagers, prisoners who know no German fall into a world "filled with a dreadful sound and fury signifying nothing." Many survivors pick up words and fragments in unknown languages that anchor them in daily life, in the same way that they scavenge potato peelings to ease hunger. Levi picks up a few German words while a student, but these are useless in Auschwitz. He pays with his bread ration for lessons and realizes the harsh, stylized Lager tongue little resembles the refined language of Goethe and Heine. Each Lager has a sub-jargon. After Liberation, Levi shocks Germans by using this dialect but he makes no effort to learn to speak more genteelly for the same reason he does not remove his tattoo. Yiddish is the camp's second language, and Italian Jews who do not speak it are suspect.

Not all suffer equally from limited communication. Some are indifferent, some beg for shreds of information, some spread disinformation, some collect and interpret signs. Monowitz regularly receives new prisoners from across Europe, bringing news. Many other Lagers are fed from other Lagers or ghettos, already cut off from the world. Forbidden communication because they are unclean, Jews wonder about relatives and adopt the opinions forced on them. This leads to ignorance and intolerance. Allowed mail, "political" prisoners are envied. With most relative destroyed or dispersed, to whom would Jews write? Levi corresponds with his family.

Chapter 5, Useless Violence

Chapter 5, Useless Violence Summary and Analysis

Unfortunately, violence—even murder and war—can be useful when it serves a goal and suffering is merely a by-product. The Hitler years are characterized by the desire simply to inflict pain. The goals of Nazism, made clear in Mein Kampf, are hateful but not insane. Nazis take joy in their neighbor's misfortune and in inflicting suffering through "disproportionate" massacres and minor, individual acts. In the Lager system, this begins with the train to the unknown, ordinary boxcars packed with "human material." From Italy, convoys carry "only" 50-60 Jews, politicals, and partisans per car, while in Eastern Europe, Jews and Slavs are packed in tightly, for whether they die en route or in the camp is immaterial. Prisoners are ordered to take their valuables, which will "come in handy," are receive no provision for food, water, bedding, or bodily functions. Some hear rumors and make provisions. Their cars have survivors. Old people are most traumatized by relieving themselves in public, so a chamber pot behind a rigged screen symbolizes that they are not yet animals.The daily rhythm of the Lager is a continual "offense to modesty." At Birkenau, women use a large bowl to draw soup, evacuate waste, and wash. Those who wet themselves are punished and derided. People are stripped naked on arrival and regularly thereafter, and feel like worms, ready to be crushed.

Emblematic of the Lager are the twice-daily roll calls in all weather. The dead and dying are laid out beside the living to assure each tally matches the preceding. Perceived by the prisoners as empty ritual, roll calls are, in fact, Prussian "drills" that reinforce the difference between master and inferior races. Life in the Lager is a caricature of army life: uniforms, marching in ranks, martial music, and a strict regimen of making bunk beds at reveille to suit the German mania. Scribes tattoo prison registration numbers on Jewish forearms causing particular trauma to the Orthodox because it is forbidden in Lev. 19.28, and it is gratuitous because clothing already bears their numbers. Although it would be more "economical" to let the elderly die in their beds, they are dragged to gas chambers to add to the collective agony.

The Lagers serve three purposes: slave labor, eliminating political adversaries, and exterminating inferior races. They appear as soon as Hitler takes power but, because "work ennobles," use prisoners only as beasts of burden. Tailors, cobblers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and bricklayers are allowed to follow their useful trade, and many take pride in their work, even though it benefits the Nazis. The Nazis perform painful medical experiments whose results could as easily be calculated, and extend their cruelty to corpses, which are turned into industrial products. Few companies could be ignorant that human hair is being sold to them for mattress ticking or tons of human ashes for filling swamp lands, insulating buildings, and making phosphate fertilizer Degrading the victims lessens the perpetrators' guilt. This is the sole usefulness of useless violence.

Chapter 6, The Intellectual in Auschwitz

Chapter 6, The Intellectual in Auschwitz Summary and Analysis

Hans Mayer is born in Vienna in 1912, studies literature and philosophy, and clashes with the Nazis. With the passage of the Nuremberg Laws (1935) and the annexation of Austria (1938), Mayer sees that every Jew is slated to die, and, though agnostic and ignorant of Hebrew culture—a perfect "prodigal Jew—he flees to Belgium and becomes Jean Améry. He does not fare well as a French writer and joins the Resistance, looking to "return the blow" against Nazism. Belgium falls in 1940, Améry is arrested by the Gestapo only in 1943, and after savage torture, goes to Auschwitz. Améry and Levi never see one another after Liberation, but correspond and read one another's books. Améry writes about the pros and cons of being an intellectual in Auschwitz. His definition of intellectual—aesthetic, abstract, humanist, and philosophical, both by education and by association—seems too restrictive to Levi, who includes such traits as education beyond one's trade and keeping up-to-date and open. They agree that faced with manual labor, cultivated people suffer more than uncultured at dignity lost by being physically inept. Some, receiving the Kapos' first blow, grow despondent, while others learn to do what they must. Levi is a quick study.

Barracks life, where everyone battles everyone else, is even more painful for the cultivated unprepared to strike back when fellow prisoners abuse them. The idiotic bed-making, nudity and other drills are wearying. Améry suffers at the mutilation of German in a way few intellectuals do. He tells of returning the punch of a huge Polish criminal, knowing he will be badly beaten but needing to preserve his dignity. Levi cannot return blows and does not regret this, but admires Améry for going against his nature. Levi hears recently that Améry calls him a "forgiver" but denies it, because no human act can erase a crime. There must be justice. Only once does Levi fight back, against Elias, a robust dwarf who seems happy at Auschwitz. Kicking Elias out of wounded dignity, Levi finds himself nearly strangled and thereafter leaves retaliation to legal institutions, however insufficient.

Culture's advantages include the occasional, fleeting thrill of glimpsing a newspaper or recalling a poem or scene to prove that the mind has not quit functioning. Levi drives his fellow Italians crazy asking them to help him piece together the tatters of his intellectual world. His training as a chemist saves him from the gas chambers, since IG Farben Industries, owner of Monowitz, values technicians. Chemistry has taught Levi never to be indifferent to those he meets, but to analyze them. Auschwitz provides people of all sorts to feed his curiosity. He does not know if he is an intellectual at the time, but if he has become one, the Lager is his university. By contrast, Améry is a political combatant, philosopher, and "diminished scholar" who rarely looks to the worn out, whose intellect is dying.

The uncultivated are better able at "not trying to understand," the Lager's first lesson. The simple are beyond the torture of asking why and often have manual skills that are in demand. Philosophers must reject common sense to accept the horrible reality of camp. Améry compares the Athenians setting up in Melos with the SS in the Ukraine, and the horror of crucified slaves along the Appian Way with Birkenau. Scholars abdicate when they say, "It has always been like this, always will be like this." Ignorance of history perhaps saves Levi. Améry seems to follow Hegel, deifying the State.

Améry says that believers (in anything except Nazism, including Marxism) better endure and survive in higher numbers. Levi enters the Lager a nonbeliever, finds no reason there to believe in providence or "transcendent justice," leaves a nonbeliever, and continues so. Only once is he tempted to pray, standing before the "commission," but refuses to blaspheme. He agrees that believers deal better, having a vaster universe and victory beyond death. Some commiserate with nonbelievers, others scorn them, and a few evangelize. Young intellectuals have an "odorless, ornate, and literary" image of death, which at Auschwitz, is "trivial, bureaucratic," and everyday, occurring without comment or tears. While prisoners speculate on what manner of death is the least painful, Levi keeps busy doing what he needs to stay alive and interprets things around him.

Chapter 7, Stereotypes

Chapter 7, Stereotypes Summary and Analysis

Of those who go through harsh experience, some are shamed into silence and some talk to bear witness, out of sheer relief, for prestige, or because they are invited to share their unique perspective. Few are historians or philosophers, able to provide simple answers. Inevitable are questions about escape, rebellion, and avoiding capture "beforehand." In places where people no longer grub an existence, freedom is considered a "natural and obvious right," and if one is denied it, one has a moral obligation to escape or rebel. This alone wipes out the shame of imprisonment. Literature and films glamorize escapees, but Lagers are filled with the "demoralized and depleted." Having been stripped of citizenship, property, and relatives, Jews have nowhere to run, even if they should survive the barbed wire, electrified grill, patrols, and dogs. Nazi propaganda has made young people hate them and few will risk Gestapo punishment for aiding and abetting escape. Note: thousands of Jews do survive through the help of courageous citizens.

The Nazis consider the escape of even a single slave intolerable, for it shatters the racial myth. Any anomaly in the roll call sets off a state of alarm, with SS and Gestapo combing the camp and its environs. Co-nationals and bunkmates are tortured for information and then killed. The whole camp stands in the roll call clearing until s/he is found, dead or alive. If alive, s/he is publicly hanged with great ferocity. At Birkenau, Mala Zimetbaum, a universally loved Polish Jew, escapes with Edek, a Polish political prisoner, and when re-captured, both kill themselves on the gallows to frustrate the Nazis. Newcomers are most prone to try escaping and are often denounced by older prisoners who fear reprisals. A gap exists between those who have lived "down there" and those whose imaginations are fed by books, films, and myths. The latter simplify and stereotype. Audiences assimilate only what they have somehow experienced, like hunger. The historian's duty is to bridge the gap.

Rebellion is quantitatively different from escape, but is also stereotyped. In fact, rebellions occur at Treblinka, Sobibor, Birkenau, and minor camps, but none succeed in liberating a camp. Rebels aim only at freeing a few to tell about conditions, but the outside world half disbelieves the uncomfortable truths. Well planned and courageously carried out, insurrections result in fearful collective reprisals. Historically, slaves do not break their own chains but have them broken by bold, open-minded, generous people, usually of privilege. In the Lagers, oppression is too great to produce strong, efficient leaders. The Birkenau revolt is unleashed by desperate, exasperated Sonderkommandos, who are well-fed and clothed.

The third inevitable question is why one does not run away "beforehand." Many intellectuals do flee, some to areas later overrun by Nazism, but others to citadels of freedom. In the 1930s, emigration is expensive and requires having a "sponsor" in the host country, the national frontiers are closed, immigration quotas are reduced, and

leaving the fatherland is traumatic. Hitler makes clear from the start that he intends to eliminate the Jews, but they cannot imagine state terrorism, believing "Nicht sein kann, was nicht sein darf" ("What may not be cannot be"). In the nuclear age, why do Europeans not flee to the regions that might avoid destruction?

Chapter 8, Letters from Germans

Chapter 8, Letters from Germans Summary and Analysis

Levi first publishes Survival in Auschwitz in 1947 and it sells poorly. A 1957 reprint does well and it is translated, adapted for the stage, and discussed in schools. Prospects of a German translation in 1959 encourage Levi: He will get to corner the oppressors and "indifferent spectators," not for revenge (which the Nuremberg trials and hangings satisfy) but to understand why the masses do nothing to stop the ferocious beasts. He recalls an exception. a German technician who stands up to the guard to demand the prisoners' admittance to a bomb shelter. Imagine if other Germans had shown such modest courage.

Not trusting his German publisher, Levi demands to check it chapter by chapter. The translator is Levi's age, an anti-Nazi fighting with the Italian partisans, who after the war is snubbed as a deserter. He feels an affinity for Levi's book, and the two perfectionists exchange friendly letters. They conflict only over what to do with Lager German phrases, which the translator assures him will not be understood. When the publisher asks Levi to write a preface, he refuses to "denature" his book and convinces them to use a letter to the translator, congratulating him on finishing their joint task and hoping it will help him understand and judge the German people through letters from readers. Not understanding them leaves a void.

Levi receives some 40 letters in 1961-64, that reflect attentive reading and address the question of whether Germans can be understood. Later letters are more pallid as children and grandchildren respond rather than the traumatized generation. Most of the letters appear to be from young people, except Dr. T. H.'s of Hamburg, who claims that scripture, Freud, and history show the Devil unleashed all around the world. In 1933, Hitler appears a lesser evil than Stalin, speaks beautifully, and enjoys foreign policy success. No one suspects he is a traitor. The Germans are betrayed and only Hitler is guilty. Germany had been the country most friendly to Jews in the world and never was there a spontaneous outrage against them. One cannot rebel against a totalitarian regime; when officers try on 20 July 1944, thousands are executed. The "poor and misguided" German people feel guilt, while Levi is restored to the land of Dante and Boccaccio. Frau H. comments on "psychic alterations" that the Devil causes.

Levi responds with his only irate letter: no church would absolve people for claiming to follow the Devil. Unless each pays personally for sins and errors, civilization vanishes—as in the Third Reich. In 1932, moderate Social Democrats are an alternative to Nazis and Communists. Hitler is a coherent fanatic, not a traitor, and never conceals or changes his ideas and rarely misses an opportunity to pour hatred on the Jews—but the friends of the Jews still elect him to office. German industrialists hire slaves for profit. Service in the SS is voluntary. German civilians must wonder about clothes and shoes

dispersed from the Auschwitz. Crystal Night is not imposed by force of law. Trying to help is risky, but showing solidarity is possible.

The remaining letters "delineate a better world," but are a tiny sampling of the millions of West Germans. L.I., a Westphalia librarian, lives a few kilometers from Auschwitz but knows nothing and now works with an evangelical association rebuilding cities. She does not mention her parents, which is symptomatic. M.S. from Frankfurt says nothing about himself while symptomatically searching for distinctions and justifications. He does not understand those who carry out inhuman orders without realizing they cannot hide behind others. The Germans go along, but one must allow exceptions when talking about any nation as an entity. M.S. hopes compatriots will read and remain aware of how low humans can fall. That will help prevent it happening again. Levi replies with perplexity. Each people can be summed up and anyone who feels at odd with that spirits outside the nation and civilization. It is possible to forecast the probability of an individual adhering to the typical, collective behavior. Too many wealthy, powerful Germans over age 45 claim not to know what German has done to Europe. I.J., a social worker from Stuttgart, is amazed that Levi's writings are not filled with hatred. She knows many people who deny the possibility of Christian atrocities against the Jews. I.J. wishes that older, "sleeping" Germans would read the book. Levi replies that as a judge he would punish culprits who have escaped justice but be horrified if an innocent person were punished. W.A., a physician from Würtemberg, talks of the help the book brings to Germans burdened by the past and future. Their culpability cannot be removed, but Germany has over centuries produced "works of noble peace." W.G., a historian/sociologist and militant Social Democrat, claims that as a child at the end of the war, he cannot accept guilt but he is ashamed for fellow Germans. He hates the criminals and their accomplices, many of whom remain alive, and hopes to fight them if they ever reappear.

H.L., a student from Bavaria, first writes in 1962, complaining that her school avoids recent history, assuring that Germany will explode again. She reacts against those who say the Jews are responsible for the Russian revolution and consider Hitler's slaughter of them just. She is ashamed to belong to the "most barbaric of people," who will be punished. Finding H.L. intelligent, unprejudiced, and refreshing, Levi asks for more precise information about contemporary Germany and assures her that "collective" and :punishment" are mutually exclusive. She sends a massive amount of information, showing that she loves her country and mother but hates the rigorous German "type," and, recognizing it in herself, detests her self. While her school's faculty has gone through Allied-mandated "de-Nazification," a few professors boast of the Nazi past and their youth and are attacked by the students, who fail to consider how they behave or what they would do in the face of Hitler. Pupils are tired of the mea culpas. The correspondence ends when Levi asks H.L. not to send gifts.

Hety S. of Wiesbaden writes 50 long letters and sends copies of relevant correspondence and photocopies between 1966 and 1982. They meet only twice, hurriedly. Hety's first letter is energetic and resentful, which sets it apart. Levi's book is nearly sold out and she is pushing to get it reprinted, because forgetting is impermissible. Levi replies, mentioning that the book has had some resonance in

Germany, but not among those who need to read it: the guilty. Gradually, Hety tells about her how her family suffers when Hitler comes to power, how she marries an IG Farben engineer and her father survives Dachau, and how her husband divorces her over her father's postwar politics. She tells of her mother's Jewish friend who wants not to endanger her, her father's amazing criticism of Thomas Mann for claiming that atrocities had been committed at Auschwitz, and her cleaning lady's complaint about persecuting poor soldiers for doing their duty, citing how her husband had gotten a sore arm in Russia from shooting Jews all the time. Hety retires from the Ministry of Culture in 1978 and begins to travel. She puts Levi and Améry in touch on condition that she receive carbons of their letters.

In 1966, Albert Speer is released from prison and in 1975 publishes his memoirs, which Hety reads and obtains a two-hour interview with him. She forwards an unwanted copy of the memoirs to Levi, who finds them lucid and sincere but filled with ambition. Hety claims that Speer is haunted by Auschwitz and how he could have failed to know about it. In 1978, Hety pays another visit and finds Speer senile, egocentric, and proud of his past. When Hety dies in 1983, Levi loses his only correspondent "with clean credentials" curious enough to rack her brains with his theses.

Conclusion

Conclusion Summary and Analysis

Lager survivors' experiences grow less relevant to each generation, which faces its own issues. Germany is again "respectable" and holds Europe's destiny in its hands. Cold War ideologies have lost credibility. Violence and lawlessness are endemic in the Third World, requiring only a "new buffoon" to organize, legalize, and mandate it. Some obscenely claim that humankind needs conflicts, but all problems can be negotiated, given good will or reciprocal fear. World War II is more brutal that earlier wars because both sides learn from each other and retaliate in kind. Great Jewish minds flee Germany and help develop the atom bomb, but are also sowing hatred in the Arab world. The silent Nazi diaspora teaches regimes the art of persecution and torture, and tyrants apply Mein Kampf with minor modifications. One could argue that had Nazism not shown itself so radical from the start, no Alliance against it would have formed. All wars should be as suicidal as the one the Nazis and Japanese had desired.

One more stereotype deserves discussion. The "torturers"—the SS—are cut from the same cloth as the rest of humanity. They are rarely monsters, but are brought up badly. They follow Nazi doctrine indifferently, out of fear, ambition, or obedience. A very few repent of joining the elite and request transfers, quietly help the victims or kill themselves. The majority of Germans accept Hitler's "beautiful words" while he is winning and are eventually swept up in his ruin. Remorse and rehabilitation follow a few years later, "the result of an unprincipled political game."

Characters

Primo Levi

The author of The Drowned and the Saved, and of two previous works about the Holocaust, Survival in Auschwitz and The Reawakening (and other works of history, poetry, and fiction), Primo Levi is an Italian-born Jew, trained as a chemist, which helps him survive Auschwitz. He is taken prisoner of the German SS, and interned in the Fossili processing camp until February 1944, when he is stuffed into a railway car with "only" 50-60 fellow prisoners, with some food laid up but no water or latrines.

Levi spends about a year in Auschwitz-Monowitz, a work camp run by the SS for IG Farben Industries, a company that values technicians. Once he passes the examination in chemistry, Levi (No. 174517) is assured a double-ration of soup per day, which is the major criterion for survival. Only once does he stand naked before the "commission" that decides who goes on working and who dies. He convinces himself that to pray under these conditions is absurd, blasphemous, and impious, and knows that if he survives he will be ashamed. Levi enters Auschwitz not believing in God and leaves the same way.

Many prisoners spend their time contemplating what manner of death is the least painful. Levi instead uses his time to optimize his chances of survival. He analyzes with a scientist's eye the variety of people he meets at Auschwitz. He doubts if he is an intellectual when he is in the Lager, but it serves as his university. Told by a believer that he is one of the chosen, whose destiny is to tell the story of the holocaust, Levi contemplates the disproportion between the privilege of surviving and its outcome in his writing, which he begins shortly after Liberation by the Red Army, an even he does not find joyful. Survival in Auschwitz is not an immediate success and he resumes working as a chemist. The book's publication in German translation is a victory, for it put him in touch with a handful of correspondents who try to explain their nation to him.

After 40 years, Levi keeps his tattoo to bear witness and addresses groups whose interest dwindles as the events he describes age. A publisher's note says that Levi dies in 1987; the book jacket calls it a probable suicide. The depressing tone of the book's "Conclusion" makes it seems not unlikely: the Holocaust is not "relevant" to the young.

Jean Améry

Born Hans Mayer in Vienna in 1912 in a Jewish family that assimilates into Austrian society but never formally converts, until age 19, he knows nothing about Yiddish or Hebrew culture. Educated in literature and philosophy, he clashes with the Nazis and, after passage of the Nuremberg Laws (1935) and the annexation of Austria (1938), he sees that every Jew is slated to die, and as a perfect "prodigal Jew, flees to Belgium and become Jean Améry. Améry does not prosper as a French writer, joins the

Resistance, and looks symbolically to "return the blow" against Nazism. Belgium falls in 1940, but Améry is not arrested by the Gestapo until 1943. After savage torture, he is sent to Auschwitz-Monowitz and later experiences Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, but writes only about Auschwitz. From Auschwitz-Monowitz he claims to recall Primo Levi, but Levi does not remember him.

Améry and Levi never see one another after Liberation, but are put together through correspondence by Levi's pen pal Hety S. and read one another's books about being "down there." Améry writes the bitter "The Intellectual in Auschwitz" or "At the Limits of the Spirit" in a book called Beyond Guilt and Expiation, or An Attempt to Overcome by One Overwhelmed. Levi paraphrases and comments on the essay in Chapter 6. Améry is a political combatant, philosopher, and "diminished scholar" who rarely looks to the worn out prisoners in Auschwitz, whose intellect is dying. He fights when he must. His view of what constitutes an "intellectual" is narrower than Levi's, but they agree that being an intellectual in the Lager is occasionally a brief blessing but more often a curse. A theoretician of suicide, Améry kills himself in 1978.

Hety S.

Author Primo Levi's most voluminous and consistent correspondents after reading his Survival in Auschwitz, Hety sends him 50 long letters and copies of other relevant correspondence and photocopies between 1966 and 1982. They meet only twice, hurriedly. Hety's family suffers when Adolf Hitler comes to power in 1933. Her activist father is laid off and she is expelled from the lyceum. She marries an IG Farben engineer and has children. Her father is sent to Dachau and tension builds with her husband when she tries to help him. They divorce after the war over her father's Social Democrat politics. She sees much around the periphery of the "final solution."

Hety retires from the Ministry of Culture of the Land of Hessen in 1978 and begins traveling, lecturing, and debating. She puts Levi and Améry n touch on condition she receive carbons of their letters. In 1975, she interviews leading Nazi Albert Speer, who has just published his memoirs, which she forwards to Levi. Hety believes that Speer is haunted by Auschwitz and how he could not have known about it. In 1978, Hety pays another visit and finds Speer senile, egocentric, and proud of his past. Hety dies in 1983, Levi's only correspondent "with clean credentials" curious enough to rack her brains with Levi's theses.

Alberto D.

Author Primo Levi's friend at Auschwitz, Alberto is a robust, courageous man, clear-sighted, and critical of those who console themselves and others with illusions, but when his 45-year-old father is selected for the gas chamber, he clings to any other possibility. Alberto disappears in 1945 and his relatives, whom Levi visits, likewise deny that he might be dead. Alberto never reappears.

Louis Darquier de Pellepoix

The commissioner of Jewish affairs in the Vichy French government in 1942, Darquier in 1978 denies publicly any responsibility for the deportation of 70,000 Jews to Auschwitz, despite photographs, statistics, and signed orders. He claims it is a Jewish hoax and play for commiseration and indemnities.

Adolf Eichmann

Termed by author Primo Levi a "gelid [icy] fanatic," Eichmann is a major figure in the Nazi "final solution," who when imprisoned offers the standard excuse that he had only followed orders. Levi pays surprisingly little attention to the man hunted down by Israel and tried, convicted, and hanged in Jerusalem.

Dr. T. H.

A Hamburg physician, T.H. Writes the only letter reacting to author Primo Levi's Survival in Auschwitz that Levi finds objectionable. T.H. claims that scripture, Freud, and history show the Devil unleashed all around the world, not only in Nazi Germany, defends electing Hitler, because the only alternative are Communists like Stalin, claims that Hitler speaks beautifully, and enjoys foreign policy successes. No one suspects that Hitler is a traitor. Germany, T.H. Claims, had been the country most friendly to Jews in the world and never was there a spontaneous outrage against them. He holds that one cannot rebel against a totalitarian regime, and cites the retribution suffered when officers try to assassinate Hitler. T.H. maintains that the "poor and misguided" German people feel guilt. Levi responds point-by-point with his only irate letter, and characterizes T.H. as an opportunistic Nazi who recants only when it becomes opportune.

Adolf Hitler

The Nazi Führer, Hitler serves as a corporal in World War II, joins the budding National Socialist (Nazi) Party and becomes its head, writes his political manifesto, Mein Kampf , which renews the old German dream of driving eastward, stifling the worker movement, annihilating Bolshevism and Judaism, controlling Europe and sharing world power with England and the United States, eliminating the mentally ill, and "useless mouths." Author Primo Levi evaluates it as arrogant, radical, thorough, ruthless, and hateful but not insane. In 1932, the Nazis win a plurality of the popular vote over Social Democrats and Communists, and Hitler takes office as Chancellor. Almost immediately concentration camps go up around Germany as he makes good on his promises. A fiery orator, he attacks the Jews at every chance.

Levi skips over most of the details of Hitler's career, which contemporaries would know only too well, mentioning in passing "Crystal Night," the first massive pogrom. He applies the principles learned from Joseph Stalin's GULag and "improves" on them.

Hitler wins his early diplomatic battles and even wins Papal recognition, but pushes on to full-fledged war, which he wages without traditional restraint. Invading Russia, he suffers his first defeats, grows paranoid, and denies himself memory of the truth. In July 1944 a clique of officers makes an abortive attempt on his life and he retaliates savagely. A gambler surrounding himself with superstitious lies, Hitler dies deluded in his Berlin Bunker as the Red Army closes in.

Rudolph Höss

The next-to-the-last commander of Auschwitz and the boastful inventor of hydrocyanic acid chambers, Höss is not a subtle man. His writings reveal little self-control or introspection. He denies coarse anti-Semitism, seeing himself as "a good functionary, father, and husband." Author Primo Levi concludes that Höss truly "slimy."

H.L.

One of Primo Levi's best correspondents after reading his Survival in Auschwitz, H.L., a student from Bavaria, first writes him in 1962, complaining that her school avoids recent history, which will assure that Germany explodes again. H.L. reacts against those who say that the Jews are responsible for the Russian revolution and consider Hitler's slaughter of them just. She is ashamed to belong to the "most barbaric of people," who will be punished. Finding H.L. intelligent, unprejudiced, and refreshing, Levi asks for more precise information about contemporary Germany and she provides a massive amount of information, showing that she loves her country and mother but hates the rigorous German "type," and, recognizing it in herself, detests her self. While her school's faculty has gone through Allied-mandated "de-Nazification," a few professors boast of the Nazi past and their youth and are attacked by the students, who fail to consider how they behave or what they would do in the face of Hitler. Pupils are tired of the mea culpas. The correspondence ends when Levi asks H.L. not to send gifts.

Filip Müller

A rare surviving Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, Müller writes Eyewitness Auschwitzh: Three Years in the Gas Chambers. His experiences are worse than author Primo Levi. They agree that liberation does not awaken happiness; Müller is too exhausted to to anything but crawl into the woods and sleep.

Miklos Nyiszli

A Hungarian physician specializing in autopsy, Kyiszli is one of the few surviving Sonderkommandos at Auschwitz. He is recruited by Dr. Josef Mengele at Birkenau and treated almost as a colleague, studying the corpses of twins who die at the same moment. Nyiszli describes recruiting and training for the Special Squad, a soccer game

between the SS and SK, and the dilemma of a teenage girl who survives the gas chamber.

Chaim Rumkowski

A failed industrialist and widower, Rumkowski in 1940 becomes President of the Lodz Ghetto, second in size only to Warsaw's, standing at 160,000 people before being shipped to Auschwitz in the autumn of 1944. Rumkowski loves authority, however minor, and is a megalomaniac dictator but good administrator, mocked by the Germans but also encouraged. He orates in the style of Hitler and considers himself an enlightened monarch and messiah. He stands up to the Gestapo, bargains over textiles and lives, but also represses Jewish rebels. As the Russians near, the Nazis liquidate the ghetto, leaving 1,000 behind to clean up traces, the only survivors to tell the story. There are two versions of Rumkowski's end: 1) he stands up for his brother and is sent to Auschwitz with him, and 2) Hans Biebow tries to rescue him and the Jewish workers to keep the business flowing. Unable to prevent Rumkowski's deportation, Biebow arranges special treatment, but the Nazis renege. Author Primo Levi, tongue in cheek, calls Rumkowski "king of the Jews."

Albert Speer

Adolf Hitler's personal architect, Speer is a dedicated Nazi who in 1942 is put in charge of armaments and munitions and later all war production, which includes the slave labor performed in the Lagers. Unique among the top Nazis, Speer confesses his guilt at the Nuremberg Trials and serves a twenty-year prison sentence. Released from prison in 1966, Speer writes his memoirs and publishes them in 1975. Author Primo Levi's frequent correspondent, Hety S., reads the book, obtains a two-hour interview, and forwards a copy of the memoirs to Levi, who finds them lucid and sincere but also ambitious. Hety claims that Speer is haunted by Auschwitz and how he could not have known about it. In 1978, Hety pays another visit and finds Speer senile, egocentric, and proud of his past. Speer dies in 1981.

Franz Strangl

A Treblinka henchman, proud of always doing his best, Strangl is imprisoned after the war for life at Düsseldorf, where he tells interviewer Gitta Sereny that victims had to be degraded before dying in order to lessen the oppressors' guilt.

Mala Zimetbaum and Edek

A young Polish Jew, captured in Belgium, Zimetbaum is interred at Birkenau, where her linguistic talents make her an interpreter and messenger. Generous and courageous, she helps many prisoners and is loved by all. In the summer of 1944, she escapes with Edek, a Polish political prisoner, by procuring SS uniforms. At the Slovak border they

are suspected of desertion and arrested. To frustrate the Nazis, Edek hangs himself before the sentence can be carried out, and Mala slits her wrist and slaps the executioner. She is trampled to death.

Objects/Places

Auschwitz

The largest Nazi extermination Lager (camp)—having by 1944 jurisdiction over forty Lagers—Auschwitz is located in Poland. Its historian is Kapo Herman. Author Primo Levi derides Auschwitz as "anus mundi." Tattooing prisoner's numbers on their arms is invented at Auschwitz in 1942; it is gratuitous violence, considering the numbers are sewn onto their clothing. By 1943, Auschwitz is 90-95% Jewish. Two major Lagers begin as part of Auschwitz and remain in its orbit. Birkenau (Auschwitz II) and Monowitz (Auschwitz III), the labor camp where Levi spends his year "down there."

Auschwitz-Monowitz is built and operated by IG Farben Industries, producing Buna synthetic rubber. It also establishes a bricklayer's trade school for prisoners under 18 to meet internal needs. Despite the fact that because of the valuable work performed by prisoners, the normal Lager allotment of a liter of soup per day is doubled, most die of exhaustion or starvation within months or are sent to Birkenau for extermination. Thus, Monowitz enjoys a constant influx of prisoners from all over Europe bearing news. Because of the Buna factory, Monowitz is bombed by the Allies in 1944. Levi describes cleaning up the rubble from the bombing—and discovering drinking water, a rare commodity. He also meets a German technician who stands up to guards for his Jewish workers during another (false) air raid.

At Birkenau, Mala Zimetbaum and Edek escape by procuring SS uniforms. Captured at the Slovak border, they are returned for public hanging but thwart the Nazis by suicide. Birkenau is also the site of Dr. Josef Mengele's horrendous medical experimentation, assisted by the prisoner Miklos Nyiszli, who describes recruiting and training for the Special Squad, a soccer game between the SS and SK, and the dilemma of a teenage girl who survives the gas chamber.

In the autumn of 1944, the Nazis blow up the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz and Birkenau, but remnants cannot be construed to have any purpose other than carrying out the "final solution." The Auschwitz Lagers are liberated by the Red Army in January of 1945.

Bergen-Belsen

Bergen-Belsen is a Nazi concentration Lager (camp) in Germany.

Buchenwald

One of the earliest Nazi concentration Lagers (camps) in Germany, Buchenwald has its story documented by the Kapo Eugen Kogan.

Einsatzkommandos

"Prompt-employment units," the Einsatzkommandos are units that machine gun civilians in Russia at the edge of mass graves that they have been forced to dig. The men assigned to this dirty work are provided alcohol and euphemisms to prevent their developing dirty consciences.

IG Farben Industries

A pre-World War II chemical industry giant, IG Farben cooperates with the SS to build and operate a Buna synthetic rubber factory at Monowitz, also known as Auschwitz III, a labor camp. Author Primo Levi is assigned there when he passes the company's chemistry examination.

Fossili

A concentration camp in Modena province, Italy, Fossili operates as a Fascist POW camp and then a collection area for Jews captured in Italy before the German SS in February 1944 take over management and begin deportations to the extermination camps in Poland. Author Primo Levi is processed to Auschwitz from Fossili.

Lodz

The most industrialized city in Poland in 1939, with a population of 750,000, Lodz (renamed Litzmannstadt by the Germans) receives Europe's first modern ghetto in February 1940. It grows in numbers to 160,000 (second only to Warsaw) before the Jews are shipped to Auschwitz in the autumn of 1944. The ghetto is authoritatively run by a failed minor industrialist, Chaim Rumkowski.

Maidanek

Maidanek is a Nazi concentration Lager (camp) in Poland.

Mathausen

A Nazi concentration Lager (camp) in Austria, Mathausen has its story told by a Kapo, Hans Marsalek. He calls the rubber truncheon der Dolmetcher ("the interpreter") because prisoners of all languages understand it.

Ravensbrück

Ravensbrück is a Nazi concentration Lager (camp) for women in Germany.

Schutzstaffel (SS)

Originally Adolf Hitler's elite "protective shield," the SS is responsible for eliminating political opponents and the undesirables, most notably the Jews. The SS supervises the vast system of Lagers—concentration and extermination camps. Their sometimes competitors, the Gestapo, join in to search for escapees when escapes occur. The SS is a volunteer organization, a proud elite. It recruits to perform the filthiest tasks of the "final solution"—killing, robbing, and incinerating the Jews—the most the desperate and disoriented Jews, a combination of pragmatism and psychology—shifting guilt to the victims

Sonderkommandos (SK)

The "Special Squad" of prisoners who collaborate most fully with the SS, the SKs keep order among new arrivals at the death camps, extract corpses from the gas chambers, loot bodies of teeth and hair and the victims' belongings, operate the ovens, and eliminate ashes. Auschwitz has 700-1,000 such "crematorium ravens" at any given time. In exchange for their grim work, they are given enough to eat for the several months they serve before themselves being eliminated en masse. Each of the 12 successive squads gases and burns its predecessors as its first task.

In October 1944, the last squad rebels and blows up a crematorium, but is killed in the unequal battle with the SS that ensues. Very few SKs survive and none willingly tells his tale, but forced statements suggest that day-to-day life for them is terrible. The SS prefers to recruit the desperate and disoriented right off the train for these squads, which are largely Jewish. Thus, the sub-race is made to perform the filthiest part of eliminating itself. As keepers of a horrendous secret, the SKs are strictly segregated, but vague rumors about their tasks circulate and prisoners speculate on what it is like to be so debased. The squads are Nazism's "most demonic crime," a combination of pragmatism and psychology—shifting guilt to the victims.

Topf of Wiesbaden

A pre-World War II manufacturer of crematoria for civilian use, Topf (still in operation in 1975) designs, builds, assembles, and tests massive crematoria for the SS. Employees could not have been ignorant of the use of their equipment in the "final solution."

Treblinka

One of the Nazi extermination Lagers (camps) in Poland, Treblinka is noted for Franz Stangl and other "butchers."

Themes

Shame

Paradoxically, shame and/or guilt—a vague anguish whose source cannot be pinpointed, afflicts the victims of the Lager rather than their tormentors, who tend to fabricate a "convenient reality" of invented memories as a substitute for the repugnant horrors in which they have participated. Alcohol and euphemisms are used during their service to ease their consciences. After the war, each telling of their story seems truer and is more readily believed. When guilt is suppressed by claiming "I don't remember," it is often a formulaic "fossilized lie." German civilians learn not to see, hoping that this spares them complicity.

The victims' memories also are filtered, but with no intention to deceive. They skim over painful episodes and dwell on moments of respite. Discomfort over re-acquired freedom is different for each, but all feel diminished by having lived at an animal level, having stolen, forgotten country, culture, family, past, and planned future. The "saved," whose lot it becomes to bear witness to what they have lived through, then to be the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the "gray zone" and the spies. This creates survivor guilt.

Nazi regimens, intended to maximize the "collective agony" of the Lagers, pinpoint those activities that cause the most shame: nudity, relieving oneself in public, and for Orthodox Jews tattooing, which violates the Mosaic Law. The daily rhythm of the Lager is a continual "offense to modesty." The extreme case of collaboration is the Sonderkommandos (SK), who do the dirty work. Combining pragmatism and psychology—and shifting guilt to the victims—is Nazism's "most demonic crime,"

Truth

In his political manifesto, Mein Kampf , written years before coming to power, Adolf Hitler tells what he plans to do: drive eastward for land, stifle the worker movement, annihilate Bolshevism and Judaism, control Europe and share world power with England and the United States, and eliminate the mentally ill, and "useless mouths." It as arrogant, radical, thorough, ruthless, hateful, and true. In 1932, Germans given an electoral plurality to the Nazis, Hitler takes office as Chancellor, and almost immediately concentration camps go up around Germany. A fiery orator, he attacks the Jews at every chance. He passes the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, stripping Jews of citizenship and in 1938, the Nazis attack Jewish people and property during "Crystal Night." The "final solution" begins as the eastward push into Poland and Russia begins. Hitler keeps his word.

Hitler's followers are untruthful. Postwar apologists, looking to save their own skin, claim not to have known what Hitler intends and does. He is a "traitor" who deceives them;

the Germans have always welcomed the Jews. Those charged with carrying out the "final solution" use expedient lies to calm the victims and pass hands-on guilt to Jewish collaborators. Even as they are destroying the physical evidence of Holocaust—demolishing gas chambers and ovens that could be used for no other purpose, and eliminating most of their paper trail—the Nazis boast that the world will never believe so vast and so monstrous a conspiracy. People will believe that the exaggerations are Allied propaganda and will believe the Nazis, who will deny everything. Books like Primo Levi's are intended to see that the truth prevails.

Religion

Religion occupies an odd position in The Drowned and the Saved, for author Primo Levi and the majority of the inmates whom he discusses are non-religious Jew. Levi enters Auschwitz without religion and sees no signs of providence or "transcendent justice" that might convert him. He and Jean Améry, a fellow survivor and philosophical writer about the Holocaust, agree that believers deal better with conditions than non-believers, having a vaster universe and looking towards victory beyond death. Améry stipulates that this extends to belief in anything other than Nazism, including Marxism. Auschwitz is filled with believers of all types, some of whom commiserate with nonbelievers, while others scorn them, and a few try to evangelize, but accepting a new faith under such conditions seems opportunistic at best. Levi is only once tempted to pray, standing naked before the "commission" that decides who is still fit to work and who goes to the gas chambers. Levi characterizes praying under such conditions "blasphemy," and refuses, knowing that if he survives, he would feel guilty.

Outside of this ontological crisis, religion is marginal. The SS gladly inflicts on Jews things that violate their law and ethos—nudity and tattooing most prominently—but "Jewish" is a matter of genetics, not of religion. Neither Levi nor Améry knows Yiddish or Hebrew, but both are arrested as Jews. The Pope agrees on a Concordat with Adolf Hitler. Postwar Germans disbelieve that Western Christians would commit such atrocities; a Westphalia librarian volunteers to work with an evangelical association that rebuilds European cities destroyed by the war as a means of restitution. Many vaguely blame the Devil, but a student from Bavaria specifically believes that "mysticism and superstition"—i.e., religion—are not necessary for the "most barbaric of people" to be punished. Young Germans are said to be tired of hearing their elders' constant mea culpas—the Roman Catholic liturgical admission of personal fault or guilt.

Style

Perspective

The author of The Drowned and the Saved, Primo Levi is an Italian-born Jew, a trained chemist, and survivor of a year at Auschwitz. He has already published two works about the Holocaust, Survival in Auschwitz and The Reawakening, along with other works of history, poetry, and fiction. This volume is an attempt at defeating the cynical Nazi certitude that the Holocaust will be seen as a hoax or propaganda because it is too massive to be believed. He writes on behalf of those who do not survive as one who has come close to being drowned but has been saved. He deals with themes that often come up when survivors tell their story, breaking down stereotypes and explaining the rationale of the SS guardians. A sampling of letters from Germans who read Survival in Auschwitz provides valuable perspective.

With each passing generation, interest in the Holocaust diminishes but the chance that another "buffoon" like Hitler could arise somewhere in the world and requires that youth not divert themselves exclusively with their own interests. The Drowned and the Saved is a powerful clarion call not to forget.

Tone

No book on the Holocaust, Adolf Hitler's "final solution" for the question of the Jews in Europe can be wholly objective, particularly if the author has spent a year in Auschwitz. The Drowned and the Saved is filled with Primo Levi's recollections of the horror and, indeed, meditations on the intent of the horror. At the same time, he goes out of his way to demonstrate that he does not hate the German nation for destroying his own. Germans who read his earlier work, Survival in Auschwitz in translation are amazed that he can keep from hating them. Levi laments that individual, culpable Germans who have escaped punishment are still at large, but wants to understand how the vast majority of the German people look the other way. He emphasizes that a minority of SS troops and Kapos are true sadists.

The mood of the book is: here are questions about the Holocaust that frequently come up in questions and whose answers often do not satisfy—particularly as the events grow more distant. Levi balances the subjective and objective superbly. He touches readers' hearts and minds without mawkishness. The "Conclusion" is rather depressed, as Levi demonstrates the Nazi horror could flare up in the Third World and people are as likely to be unprepared for another Hitler as were the Germans in the early 1930s. Having resisted being "preachy" in Survival in Auschwitz, Levi indulges a bit here, in his final published work. He dies within a year of its publication, perhaps by his own hand.

Structure

The Drowned and the Saved consists of eight numbered and titled chapters, preceded by a Preface and followed by a Conclusion. It is a thematic treatment of the Holocaust. Primo Levi has already produced two books that chronicle life and death at Auschwitz and the return from "down there" to the ordinary world (Survival in Auschwitz and The Reawakening). He refers to these in the present book. A thematic treatment means that there is no chronological thread to follow, but the author manages to prevent the reader's getting lost. Levi follows a definite logic through the text.

The Preface discusses the limitations of survivors' stories as historical material. Chapter 1, "The Memory of the Offense," tells how and why victims' and perpetrators' stories become stylized and stereotyped. Chapter 2. "The Gray Zone," deals with varying degrees of guilt among victim-collaborators and the oppressors. Chapter 3, "Shame," details why and how all prisoners feel diminished by being forced to live at an animal level, without emotions and with their moral yardstick changed. Chapter 4, "Communicating," pictures how people from across Europe and of all cultural levels are thrown together in a state of chaos and coercion in the Lagers and have to learn a special brand of German to survive.

Chapter 5, "Useless Violence," depicts how the Third Reich does not carry out the "final solution" in an "economical" way, but makes sure every detail contributes to the victims' collective agony. Chapter 6, "The Intellectual in Auschwitz," tells the story of Hans Mayer/Jean Améry, and presents their views on the pros and cons of being an intellectual in an atmosphere like the Lager. Without becoming a believer, Levy admits that believers have a better chance of survival because they look beyond the current hell. Chapter 7, "Stereotypes," sets straight why audiences' inevitable questions about escape, rebellion, and avoiding capture "beforehand" are romantic and unrealistic. Levi wonders, in the nuclear age, why do Europeans not flee to the regions that might avoid destruction? Finally, Chapter 8, "Letters from Germans," summarize the limited but heartfelt response to the German translation of his Survival in Auschwitz. This closing chapter helps illustrate much of what he has said about memory, guilt, and communication. The Conclusion suggests the dangers of new generations losing interest in the Holocaust and risking the rise of another Hitler.

Quotes

"The first news about the Nazi annihilation camps began to spread in the crucial year of 1942. They were vague pieces of information, yet in agreement with each other: they delineated a massacre of such vast proportions, of such extreme cruelty and such intricate motivation that the public was inclined to reject them because of their very enormity. It is significant that the culprits themselves foresaw this rejections well in advance: many survivors (among others, Simon Weisenthal in the last pages of The Murderers Are Among Us) remember that the SS militiamen enjoyed cynically admonishing the prisoners:
" 'However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers.'" Preface, p. 11.

"The past is a burden to them; they feel repugnance for things done or suffered and tend to replace them with others. The substitution may begin in full awareness, with an invented scenario, mendacious, restored, but less painful than the real one; they repeat the description to others but also to themselves, and the distinction between true and false progressively loses its contours, and man ends by fully believing the story he has told so many times and continues to tell, polishing and retouching here and there the details which are least credible or incongruous or incompatible with the acquired picture of historically accepted events: initial bad faith has become good faith. The silent transition from falsehood to self-deception is useful: anyone who lies in good faith is better off. He recites his part better, is more easily believed by the judge, the historian, the reader, his wife, and his children. Chapter 1, The Memory of the Offense, p. 27.

"Privileged prisoners were a minority within the Lager population, nevertheless they represent a potent majority among survivors. In fact, even apart from the hard labor, the beatings, the cold, and the illnesses, the food ration was decisively insufficient for even the most frugal prisoner: the physiological reserves of the organism were consumed in two or three months, and death by hunger, or by diseases induced by hunger, was the prisoner's normal destiny, avoidable only with additional food. Obtaining that extra nourishment required a privilege—large or small, granted or conquered, astute or violent, licit or illicit—whatever it took to life oneself above the norm." Chapter 2, The Gray Zone, pp. 40-41.

"Concerning these squads, vague and mangled rumors already circulated among us during our imprisonment and were confirmed afterward by the other sources mentioned

before. But the intrinsic horror of this human condition has imposed a sort of reserve on all the testimony, so that even today it is difficult to conjure up an image of 'what it meant' to be forced to exercise this trade for months. It has been testified that a large amount of alcohol was put at the disposal of those wretches and that they were in a permanent state of complete debasement and prostration. One of them declared: 'Doing this work, one either goes crazy the first day or gets accustomed to it.' Another, though: 'Certainly, I could have killed myself or got myself killed; but I wanted to survive, to avenge myself and bear witness. You mustn't think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy." Chapter 2, The Gray Zone, pp. 52-53.

"Such an opinion seemed monstrous to me. It pained me as when one touches an exposed nerve, and kindled the doubt I spoke of before: I might be alive in the place of another, at the expense of another; I might have usurped, that is, in fact, killed. The 'saved' of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good, the bearers of a message: what I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the 'gray zone,' the spies. It was not a certain rule (there were none, nor are there certain rules in human matters), but it was nevertheless a rule. I felt innocent, yes, but enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search for justification in my own eyes and those of others. The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died." Chapter 3, Shame, p. 82.

"The camp's rudimentary ethic stipulated that a blow must in some way be justified, so as to facilitate the establishment of the transgression-punishment-repentance parabola; therefore, often the Kapo or his substitutes accompanied the blow with a grunt: 'You know why?' which was followed by a a summary 'communication of the crime.' But for the newly deaf and dumb this ceremonial was useless. They instinctively sought refuge in corners to protect their backs; aggression could come from any direction. They looked around them with bewildered eyes, like trapped animals, and that is what they had in fact become." Chapter 4, Communicating, p. 96

"Thinking back with the wisdom of hindsight to those years that devastated Europe and, in the end, Germany itself, one feels torn between two opinions: Were we witnessing the rational development of an inhuman plan or a manifestation (unique in history and still unsatisfactorily explained) of collective madness? Logic and intent on evil or the absence of logic? As so often happens in human affairs, the two alternatives coexisted. There is no doubt that the fundamental design of National Socialism had a rationale of its own." Chapter 5, Useless Violence, p. 106

"An army marches by in military step, in close order, to the sound of a band; so too there must be a band in the Lager, and the march-past must be a march-past by the book, with 'eyes left' before the reviewing stand and to the sound of music. This ceremony is so necessary, so obvious, as even to prevail over the anti-Jewish

legislation of the Third Reich: with paranoid sophistry, this legislation prohibited Jewish orchestras and musicians from playing the scores of Aryan composers, whom they thereby would contaminate. But in the Lagers filled with Jews there were no Aryan musicians—nor, for that matter, are there many military marches written by Jewish composers—therefore, waiving the rules of purity, Auschwitz was the only German place were Jewish musicians could, indeed were compelled to play Aryan music: necessity knows no rules." Chapter 5, Useless Violence, p. 116

"So then culture could be useful even if only in some marginal cases, and for brief periods; it could enhance an hour, establish a fleeting bond with a companion, keep the mind alive and healthy. It definitely was not useful in orienting oneself and understanding: on this score my experience as a foreigner is identical to that of the German Améry. Reason, art, and poetry are no help in deciphering a place from which they are banned. In the daily life 'down there,' made up of boredom and interwoven with horror, it was salutary to forget them, just as it was salutary to learn to forget home and family. By this I do not mean definitive oblivion, of which, for all that, no one is capable, but of a relegation to that tic of memory where all the clutter of stuff that is no longer useful in everyday life is stored." Chapter 6, The Intellectual in Auschwitz, p. 142.

"This is the seal of a small emblematic poem: Palmerström, an extremely law-abiding German citizen, is hit by a car in a street where traffic is forbidden. He gets up bruised and battered and thinks about it. If traffic is forbidden, vehicles may not circulate, that is, they do not circulate. Ergo he cannot have been hit it is 'an impossible reality,' an Unmögliche Tatasche (this is the title of the poem). He must have only dreamed it because, indeed, 'things whose existence is not morally permissible cannot exist.'" Chapter 7, Stereotypes, pp. 164-165.

"The question of a preface came up: Fischer the publisher asked me to write it myself. I hesitated, then in refused. I had a feeling of confused reluctance, repugnance, an emotional block that choked off the flow of ideas and words. In short, I was asked to append to the book—that is, to the testimony—a direct appeal to the German people, a peroration, a sermon. I was expected to raise my voice, climb on the podium, change from witness to judge, preacher; set forth theories and interpretations of history; divide or set apart the pious from the impious; pass from the third person to the second. All these were tasks that went beyond me, tasks I would gladly have delegated to others, perhaps the readers themselves, whether German or not." Chapter 8, Letters from Germans, p. 173.

"Your most audacious statement is the one regarding the unpopularity of anti-Semitism in Germany. It was the foundation of Nazi doctrine from its beginnings: it was of a mystical nature; the Jews could not be 'the people elected by God' since that's what the Germans were. there's neither a page nor a speech of Hitler's in which hatred against the Jews is not reiterated to the point of obsession. It was not marginal to Nazism: it

was its ideological center. And so: how could the people 'most friendly toward the Jews' vote for the party and praise the man who called the Jews Germany's first enemy and claimed that the prime objective of their politics was 'strangling the Judaic hydra'?" Chapter 8, Letters from Germans, p. 179.

Topics for Discussion

How do stereotyping and stylization help victims and oppressors tell their stories? What are the psychological benefits to each? How does it limit the value of their stories as historical sources?

Primo Levi suspends judgment on the collaborators unless one has stood in their shoes. How would you on balance judge a Sonderkommando?

How would you judge Primo Levi's decision on sharing the water? What would be the arguments for and against the four options? How does this illustrate his concept of shifting moralities?

How do the Nazis use language as a weapon to humanize?

How would you rate the various forms of torment inflicted on prisoners in the Lager? What are the most premeditated? Which would you find the worst—and why?

What are the pros and cons of using the intellect in the Lager? How do intellect and religion intersect?

What factors not depicted in romantic books and movies prevent Lager inmates from escaping? What do you believe is the greatest deterrent?