Survival in Auschwitz Study Guide

Survival in Auschwitz by Primo Levi

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Primo Levi, the author and subject of the autobiography, was arrested in December, 1943. An anti-Fascist, Italian Jew, he was sent to a prison camp in Italy and then deported to Auschwitz in February, 1944. Levi survived in Auschwitz largely because by 1944, the Nazis had suspended full-effort genocide in preference to enforced convict labor. When the camp was evacuated in January, 1945, Levi remained behind, a victim of Scarlet Fever. After surviving for ten final days in the abandoned and rapidly deteriorating camp, he was liberated by the arriving Soviet Army. After spending several months in a Soviet camp for former concentration camp inmates, Levi eventually returned to his home,Turin, in October of 1945.

Levi was born in Turin, Italy, at the end of July, 1919. He was raised in a liberal, Jewish family and received his education in chemistry from the University of Turin, graduating with honors in 1941. His early education included anti-Fascist components. During late 1943, the legal Italian government agreed to an armistice with the Allies. Around that time, Levi became involved in anti-Fascist politics. Shortly after the armistice, the German government assumed control of the Italian state and forcibly reinstated the Fascist Benito Mussolini as dictator. Levi, living in the German-occupied zone of Italy, joined the Italian resistance movement and, with several comrades, took to the wilderness in search of partisans. They were captured and arrested by the Fascist militia and detained for a few days. When Levi's Jewish heritage was discovered, he was sent to an internment camp at Fossoli near Modena.

In February, 1944, Levi and other Jews were transported to Auschwitz by means of cattle trucks. Of the six-hundred-and-fifty Jews in Levi's shipment, only twenty left Auschwitz alive. Levi notes that the average life expectancy within the camp system was three months for healthy new arrivals capable of work. Levi survived due to a confluence of circumstances. He possessed rudimentary German-language skills and quickly enhanced his abilities. He made fortunate friendships, which allowed him improved food allotments. And during November, 1944, his excellent, formal education in chemistry got him assigned to an indoor chemical laboratory;, therefore avoiding months of freezing temperatures and harsh physical work. His position in the laboratory also allowed for routine, petty thefts, which secured, via elaborate and clandestine arrangements, additional food.

In January, 1945, the Auschwitz camp systems were evacuated by the Nazis in the face of the Soviet advance. Inmates capable of walking were driven out into the winter and force-marched for many days—most died of exposure, hypothermia and summary executions. Levi, however, had contracted scarlet fever and was considered too ill to travel. He was thus abandoned in the Auschwitz infirmary when the camp was evacuated. Over the next ten days, he joined with a few other contagious inmates to secure a subsistence-level living. On January 27, 1945, Auschwitz was formally liberated by the Soviet army, and Levi and the other inmates were relocated to a convalescent camp for several months. Levi finally returned to him home in Turin in October, 1945, having survived eleven months confinement in Auschwitz.

His autobiography—the subject of this summary—was originally published in Italian as a limited printing in 1947. A later, Italian-language revision was published in 1958. The book was translated into English in 1959, and has been in nearly continuous publication since. Most English-language printings bear the title *If This Is A Man*; only the United States versions are commonly entitled *Survival in Auschwitz*. A variety of formats, editions, and revisions exist, many providing textually relevant appendices from a variety of sources, such as biographies or interviews. The book has been translated into numerous additional languages and is universally accepted as a classic work.

Chapter 1 "The Journey,"

Chapter 1 "The Journey," Summary and Analysis

Primo Levi, the author and subject of the autobiography, was arrested in December, 1943. An anti-Fascist Italian Jew, he was sent to a prison camp in Italy and then deported to Auschwitz in February, 1944. Levi survived Auschwitz largely because by 1944, the Nazis had suspended full-effort genocide in preference to enforced convict labor. When the camp was evacuated in January, 1945, Levi remained behind, a victim of Scarlet Fever. After surviving for ten days in the abandoned and rapidly deteriorating camp, he was liberated by the arriving Soviet Army. After spending several months in a Soviet camp for former concentration camp inmates, Levi eventually returned to his home of Turin in October of 1945.

The chapter details the process which led to Primo Levi, the author and principle subject of the autobiography, to be captured and deported to Auschwitz. A basic familiarity with Italian politics of the early- and mid-1940s is expected, though not required, to understand the text. Levi was captured by the Italian Fascist militia in December, 1943, at the age of twenty-four. As a member of an anti-Fascist movement, he, along with others, was detained and interrogated, whereupon he admitted his heritage of being both Italian and Jewish. He was thereafter deported to the Fossoli detention camp near Modena. Within a few weeks about 650 Jewish Italians were interned within the camp. Toward the end of February a contingent of German SS men visited the camp and performed inspections. They announce that all Jews will be deported to another location. The Jewish response is varied; Levi suspects he will be executed, but other Jews feel they will simply be placed in a ghetto.

During the forced evacuation, 650 Jewish men are packed into twelve goods wagons. Locked in, their journey begins. The trip is slow and tortuous; no food or water is provided and the weather is freezing. Sometimes, the train halts for many hours and then proceeds again. Of the forty-five people in Levi's car, only four survive the Holocaust. Finally the train arrives in Auschwitz, and the cars are opened. A few German SS Men stand about, perform interrogations, make visual appraisals, and sentence well over half of the arrivals, including nearly all the women, all the children, all the elderly, and all the infirm to immediate murder. Of the 650 people, ninety-six men and twenty-nine women are judged to be healthy and are assigned, respectively, to Monowitz-Buna and Birkenau forced labor camps. The remaining people are gassed and cremated within a few hours.

Chapter 2 "On The Bottom,"

Chapter 2 "On The Bottom," Summary and Analysis

Levi and twenty-nine other men are loaded onto a truck and transported to the Monowitz-Buna forced labor camp, about twenty minutes distance from the Auschwitz rail yard. They enter the gates under the sign *Arbeit Macht Frei*. They are held for hours in a cold room, filled ankle deep with freezing water. They are ordered to completely undress and remain naked, without shoes, for more hours. Then barbers enter the room and shave their heads. They then remain for more hours, wondering what has happened to their mothers, sisters, daughters, and infants. A man enters and offers some concise information—they are at Buna, a work camp of about 10,000 prisoners, near Auschwitz in Upper Silesia. The camp produces synthetic rubber, or buna, and is thus named after the product manufactured there. They will be issued new clothes and must either work or perish. A little later they are showered as a massed group and then driven out into the snow. They are handed rags and shattered wooden shoes and ordered to dress. Levi realizes he lacks the language to describe this "demolition of a man" (p. 26); later he is tattooed with his inventory number, 174517. He later learns that he arrived on the 174,000 shipment and was the 517th man processed that day. Thus, the numbers can be used to infer much about a man's time in Auschwitz.

For several more hours, they receive a barrage of instruction in a variety of languages, which most of them do not speak or understand. Fragments of meaning are gleaned and shared. They are then marched to a large open space and organized in columns and rows and left to stand. Levi engages a young boy named Schlome in a brief discussion. Schlome, a veteran of the camps for several years, offers depressing news and astounding advice. Levi is now a prisoner of the Lager, a square of about six hundred yards in length, fenced off by two razor-wire enclosures, the inner one electrified. The Lager consists of sixty wooden huts, called Blocks. Most Blocks house the inmates in packed and squalid conditions. Levi is a *Hdftling*, or prisoner, and as a Jew he is at the bottom of the camp's social structure. The camp is managed by a plethora of Byzantine rules, which are numerous and complicated—most of them are nonsensical, but are rules nevertheless. Failure to comply with any rule results in beatings or worse.

Life in the Lager consists of insufficient food, filthy surroundings, no comfort and daily work of a harsh and physical nature. Those who become sick or incapacitated due to injury, starvation or exhaustion are murdered. The chapter contains a fairly detailed list of many of the Lager's rules and practices and demonstrates how completely subjugated the inmates found themselves to be. Levi presents a brief statement that his language is incapable of portraying the horrid conditions of life which resulted, ultimately, in the destruction of both life and the will—he calls the situation beginning 'on the bottom'.

Chapter 3 "Initiation,"

Chapter 3 "Initiation," Summary and Analysis

Levi is assigned to Block thirty. Conditions are so cramped that each bunk is shared by two inmates, so Levi sleeps alongside Diena, who is friendly but exhausted. Levi passes his first night in confused, restive sleep. In the early morning the workers are summoned to work. They are issued an insufficient ration of bread and rushed to a washroom to bathe in fouled basins. For several weeks Levi will wrestle with the concept of cleanliness—he wonders what could be the point of bathing in sordid, fouled water which cannot clean the body. In the end he comes to agree with a man named Steinlauf and many of the camp's oldest survivors; bathing is a ritual, symbolic act which maintains human dignity whether or not it is physically effective. Bathing, even if physically fruitless, maintains the scaffolding of civilization and establishes one's will to continue living. The philosophy espoused by Steinlauf is essential to Levi's survival and plants the germ of an idea, which runs throughout the remainder of the autobiography.

Chapter 4 "Ka-Be,"

Chapter 4 "Ka-Be," Summary and Analysis

Ka-Be is the camp abbreviation of *Krankenbau*, or infirmary. Levi starts the chapter by describing some of the daily work routine of life in the camp. In general the inmates are used as beasts of burden to transport heavy objects around the work camp area. He reports that he has now been at Monowitz-Buna for two months and that out of the more than one hundred initially reporting with his shipment, only forty remain alive.

One day the inmates are assigned to work in pairs carrying heavy iron frames; Levi is assigned to work with *Nul Achtzen*, a young man who is so utterly defeated that he goes by his tattooed number of 018 rather than his name. Although a strong worker, Null Achtzen is entirely without motivation. After carrying one frame, Levi and his companion return for another frame. This time they struggle through the mud unsuccessfully, and then both men fall; the heavy iron framework lands upon Levi. The accident causes a severe wound to Levi's ankle, and he is unable to effectively walk. After a casual beating, Levi is assigned to light labor for the remainder of the day. When he returns to the block in the evening, his foot is swollen, painful, and nearly useless. He is informed that he will be sent to Ka-Be, or the infirmary, in the evening.

Levi's friends coach him carefully about entering Ka-Be because those who enter with an unfavorable diagnosis usually end up murdered. Those who present with insufficient cause are beat up while those who present with grave illness are summarily murdered. Those who do not recuperate quickly are likewise murdered. Levi presents his wound to the staff, and after no more than a visual inspection, he is declared *Arztvormelder*; in other words, he has a legitimate injury with the possibility of recovery and will thus be admitted for actual convalescence. He returns on the following day for an actual examination and is then admitted. Levi undergoes a few simple examinations, receives inadequate treatment, and is then assigned to a bunk to either convalesce or die. After he is admitted, Levi makes the uncertain acquaintance of Schmulek and Walter, two friends who are recuperating in a nearby bunk. They tell Levi about the operations carried on at the distant crematorium; as Levi resists hearing the information, they simply look at him as a child. After a few days, Schmulek is deemed too unfit and is sent off to the crematorium himself.

Levi finds the change in venue and rules disorienting but quickly realizes the advantages of not working all day long. A stay in the Ka-Be, however, has an unusual deleterious effect on many inmates, including Levi. The absence of work allows for sufficient rest and recuperation, and one's mind again begins to function. Levi spends many despondent hours pining for home, the past and dead friends. He contemplates his situation and falls into despair, along with many other patients. He ultimately realizes that the camp is designed to kill men's souls long before it takes their anonymous lives.

Chapter 5 "Our Nights,"

Chapter 5 "Our Nights," Summary and Analysis

After three weeks, Levi is discharged from Ka-Be. Discharge is a tumultuous and difficult time because the convalescent is assigned into a Block at random. Thus, they find themselves among strangers who are already bonded to each other. The result is often fatal. Fortunately, Levi is assigned a Block where he has a good friend. Alberto and Levi have known each other for many months and have developed a strong and intimate friendship, which will continue to develop throughout their time at Auschwitz. Alberto is resourceful, intelligent and well liked, and, thus Levi, as his friend, is accepted.

The remainder of the chapter discloses the life of an inmate after the working day. After evening roll call, a brief period of idleness is spent in the Block huts. Various personal services are offered by inmates—for example, a doctor might tend to minor foot injuries in exchange for a sliver of bread or a tailor might mend a garment for a few inches of additional thread. If the inmates are fortunate, they might be able to exchange a broken shoe for a more-functional shoe. Finally, at bedtime, the inmates crowd two to a bunk and go to sleep. Levi reports that dreams are frustratingly lifelike. Most prisoners dream of food interspersed with dreaming of work and torture. Infrequently, dreams are pleasant about home and family, only to be warped into a nightmare mockery. Levi reports that in many ways the pleasant dreams are the worst of all because morning always arrives with crushing reality and attempts to extricate the pleasant aspects of a dream from the overwhelming depression of reality are rarely successful.

The Block huts are rudimentary and nighttime elimination needs are satisfied by a few buckets. As dysentery is common and the diet predominantly watery soup, inmates typically must arise several times each night. Camp rules state that whoever finally tops off the bucket must carry it to the distant latrine. Old-time inmates grow expert in judging an empty bucket by the sound of a stream of urine against the side, and thus newcomers are usually the ones to empty the buckets. The trip is time-consuming, difficult and unpleasant. The full buckets are potential vectors of disease and contamination and cannot be carried without sloshing a good deal of their contents about.

Nighttimes are short and filled with fitful sleep and anxious dreams. The morning comes quickly; Levi describes the morning as a hurricane of frantic activity. Beds are made, clothes donned and bladders emptied before morning roll call ends all personal activity.

Chapter 6 "The Work,"

Chapter 6 "The Work," Summary and Analysis

Levi's bunkmate for several weeks is an unknown Pole, who eventually is sent to Ka-Be; he is then replaced by Resnyk. Levi finds Resnyk to be personable and honest, and, an additional fortune, is that they are assigned to the same work unit. Resnyk has the uncanny ability to avoid heavy work, which is obviously a desirable trait in a workmate. Additionally, Resnyk is willing to perform an undue share of work to assist Levi.

The chapter describes a single day of work in great detail. On the day discussed, the men must move huge sleepers—giant blocks of wood used as railroad crossties. They strain Levi's capacity even to lift, and after about an hour he verges on collapse. Following Resnyk's suggestion, Levi obtains permission to visit the latrine and makes the excursion into a prolonged absence, returning just in time for the lunch break. After eating a thin turnip soup the inmates sleep for a brief period and then must return to work. Levi notes that the experienced inmates all wait at the end of the food line to obtain soup from the bottom of the vat where it is thick; those in the front of the line are served quickly, but obtain only watery broth.

Chapter 7 "A Good Day,"

Chapter 7 "A Good Day," Summary and Analysis

The chapter describes another day of work. This day, however, is a warm day—one of the first warm days of spring. The inmates are thus spared the biting cold of snow and wind. Additionally, the work assignment carries the men far from the prison and into a pleasant, verdant meadow. As they walk, they view a distant brick tower that they had previously erected. The Lager is intended to produce synthetic rubber; the prisoners are constructing a giant synthetic rubber factory, which is nearing physical completion. At noon the prisoners are treated to an exceptional feast—one of their enterprising members has secured ten gallons of extra soup; each man receives six extra pints of soup. The extra soup and the warm weather mellow the overseer and even the day's work is fairly relaxed. Note that the title provides a minor wordplay with the title of the following chapter—here, 'good' indicates the physical aspects of the day; whereas, in chapter eight, 'good' will be measured against evil.

Levi theorizes about the nature of pain and discomfort and concludes that in general only the single largest problem is considered—it subsumes the remaining problems. Thus, when the dominant problem is eradicated, one is amazed to discover yet another problem remains. Thus, as soon as the winter cold disappears, the inmates become aware of their acute hunger. Even though the days become warm, Levi's hunger eats into him and consumes him with a desire for food. He manages to acquire slivers of bread or drops of soup through various connivances.

Chapter 8 "This Side of Good and Evil,"

Chapter 8 "This Side of Good and Evil," Summary and Analysis

Most Auschwitz survivors try to infuse meaning into daily events. Faced with a life where meaning is intentionally destroyed, they strive for a sense of reality, a sense of control and a sense that meaning can be found. Levi reports, however, that the inferred meaning of most events is erroneous and often based upon misperception. The camp is overwhelmed by rumors, and legitimate information is often deliberately withheld in order for one group to gain a political or economic advantage over another group. Contrary to the expectation fostered by the strict Nazi regimen, a black market flourishes within the camp. The market connects the inmates with free German citizens, who come into contact with the forced labor camps for various reasons. Often, prisoners will steal items from camp stores and then trade these items with those who reside primarily outside of the camp. Of course, the final objective is nearly always additional food. Thus, free German citizens associated with the camp in some capacity can often trade scraps of food for expensive tools or goods; these items are, in general, then fenced at a huge profit. The process of obtaining more food than one is rationed is generically referred to as "organizing;" one "organizes" an additional slice of bread, or several men enter into an "organization" to pursue a mutually-beneficial relationship.

Levi briefly discusses several common methods of "organizing." Mahorca, a third-rate tobacco, is often a medium of exchange within the camp as are slivers of bread or cups of soup. Mahorca is usually not smoked but is instead used as currency—it is easily hidden and fairly durable. However, literally anything of any value is stolen, traded and exchanged for any benefit which it might bring. Those inmates who are sufficiently "organized" to meet their daily food rations often seek other rewards, such as prize-coupons allowing entrance to the camp brothel. Levi notes that even the guards and the German SS Men are nearly always complicit in some form of graft, and that the Ka-Be is the camp's focus of organization due to the transient nature of patients and the large number of external workers who routinely visit that location.

In general, Levi examines the subjective notion of good and contrasts it with the notion of evil, noting that within the Lager, one must steal, lie and "organize" simply to survive. Thus, the trappings of ordinary society and their moral implications are not valid within the context of Auschwitz. In the forced labor camps, the only good was survival and morality was a luxury that could not be afforded.

Chapter 9 "The Drowned and the Saved,"

Chapter 9 "The Drowned and the Saved," Summary and Analysis

Elsewhere in the autobiography Levi uses the phrase "on the bottom" to describe an inmate's lot in Auschwitz. In this chapter, he examines the individual mental state of that cadre of unfortunate men who are on the bottom. Some, the lost and destroyed, he refers to as the "drowned;" those who retain their personality he refers to as the "saved." Levi notes that within the camp, the term *muselmann* was usually used to indicate an individual was one of the "drowned." In ordinary life, there are a few men in leading positions and a few men on the bottom of society, but the bulk of men form the dominant middle class, those capable of average action but not possessed of either extreme laziness or extraordinary capacity. In Auschwitz, only those capable of constant struggle survived for any length of time. Those who vacillate are knocked aside or forced down further.

Unlike normal existence, the Lagers were possessed of a ferocious law: '"to he that has, will be given; from he that has not, will be taken away"' (p. 88). The weak are constantly persecuted until overtaken by death, while the strong continue to gain strength and become powerful, isolated and relatively wealthy. This chapter examines that process and concludes that it is beyond conventional morality and required for survival within an artificial and brutal system imposed upon the inmates by the Nazi regime. Levi summarizes the massed executions in Monowitz-Buna alone, using the figures of survivors as proof that exceptional means were required to survive: the average lifespan within the forced labor camp was only three months. Within weeks, the vast majority of individuals is overtaken by defeat and lives the remainder of their days without fear of death and too tired for thought. Only a relative handful emerge as prominent men—Kapos, cooks, or especially-skilled workers. These few prominent men were almost universally non-Jewish. The remainder of the chapter is given over to an examination of four survivors—four saved men. They are Schepschel, Alfred L., Elias Lindzin, and Henri. Each of them serves as a type for a class of man who are saved using one of several venues.

Schepschel has survived in the Lager for at least four years. He once had a wife, children, and prosperous business. Inside the Lager, he considers himself only a sack, which needs periodic refilling. His single-minded determination to find sufficient food does not allow him time for remorse or contemplation, and his survival thus hinges on his ability to "organize" tiny amounts of additional food.

Alfred L. was once a powerful man, well-known in European industrial circles. He is fifty-years-old and maintains an inner discipline and exhibits a methodical energy. His path to survival is based upon appearance—that is, he always presents himself as a clean,

proper and, therefore, powerful man. And, in time, his prominence simply grows around his appearance.

Elias Lindzin is a small, but powerful, man, compact, devoid of intelligence, but ferocious and incredibly fit and strong. His nearly-idiotic antics are always amusing to those without humor, and he finds himself frequently the center of attention. His ability to perform staggering work with relative ease secures him the position of overseer, and, thus, he does not have to work. In the outside world Elias would be in a prison or an asylum, but inside the Larger, there are no criminals nor madmen, and, thus, Elias is nearly uniquely suited to survival.

Henri, the final individual considered, appears throughout the narrative. He is twenty-two and very intelligent. He speaks numerous languages and possesses an excellent education. Henri survives by closing off every human emotion, sealing himself against the world and refusing to admit emotion in any manner. Survival is his only goal, and when he can take from the weak, he does not hesitate. By way of contrast, he uses his appearance to carefully culture pity, an emotion he does not feel himself, among his superiors and thereby gain some small advantages, which, over time, add up to a considerable position of power. Henri is simultaneously detestable and admirable and clearly forms an interesting contrast for Levi.

Chapter 10 "Chemical Examination,"

Chapter 10 "Chemical Examination," Summary and Analysis

One day after about three months in the camp, Levi has an opportunity to join Kommando 98, the Chemical Kommando, a newly-forming group. As previously noted, Levi's education had been in chemistry. He graduated in 1941, *summa cum laude*, from the University at Turin. The work group is led by Alex, a Kapo who has no chemical knowledge. Levi is happy that his particular friend, Alberto, will also possibly join the work group. For several days, the work group performs manual labor like any other assignment. Then the volunteers are summoned before a Dr. Pannwitz, a famous industrial chemist. Pannwitz inspects them as if they were fish in an aquarium and then administers a fairly lengthy oral examination on chemistry.

Levi and the others then return to the Block, where they are sent to bed for the day. They realize that the examination and the promises mean nothing and are possibly illusory. Instead, they are elated to have escaped forced labor for a day—that escape is certain and a concrete advantage that cannot be removed. In fact, as they days progress, the chemical examination will come to seem like a long-ago dream. Levi concludes the chapter by noting that Alex the Kapo and Pannwitz are one of the standards by which all Holocaust survivors judge humanity.

Chapter 11 "The Canto of Ulysses,"

Chapter 11 "The Canto of Ulysses," Summary and Analysis

The Chemical Kommando is held together but is set to work performing menial tasks such as scraping rust from the inside of holding tanks or carrying heavy loads of chemical compounds—certainly not work requiring any knowledge of chemistry. One member of the work group is Jean, a young man who is appointed assistant to the Kapo. Unlike most men in authority, Jean is friendly and genuinely concerned about the men in the group. Whereas Alex is violent and abusive, Jean is friendly and contemplative. Jean takes a liking to Levi and frequently summons him to perform particularly light work assignments. One day, Jean and Levi walk together to fetch the lunch soup ration; the trip is about one and a half miles, round trip. On the walk Levi recalls for Jean many couplets and verses of Dante's *Canto of Ulysses*, found in *The Divine Comedy*. Levi's memory is remarkable, and he attempts—often successfully—to impress upon Jean the greater meaning.

The relative meaning of the verse is obvious, and Levi's capability of seeing his own hellish plight within the context of literature is exceptional given the circumstances. Whereas the chapter is distinct and not particularly cohesive within the structural and syntactical framework of the autobiography, thematically it is central to the text. In the *Canto of Ulysses*, the great hero explains, from out of his eternally-burning sheath of flame, his life's voyage and notes that he has ended in Hell. He equates his life to the pursuit of intelligence on man's ability alone, noting that ultimately God ends man's life. Thus, symbolically, Ulysses' life indicates man's inability to create his own salvation—one must instead be subservient to God and realize the shortcomings of man. Levi's attempt to impress this philosophy on Jean is touching and impressive.

Chapter 12 "The Events of the Summer,"

Chapter 12 "The Events of the Summer," Summary and Analysis

By August, 1944, Levi has survived five months in the camp—just short of half of his eventual entire term of imprisonment. The character of the camp has changed; numerous shipments of Hungarians, coupled with constant murder, have shifted the camp's dominant language and culture to Hungarian. News of the larger war—for example, the Allied landings at Normandy—reach the camp and circulate, though the prisoners have learned that most stories are a little fact mingled with much speculation. In August, 1944, the Russian army has advanced far enough that the inmates can routinely hear distant artillery. Occasional Russian aerial bombing of the Monowitz-Buna and other Auschwitz camps begins. The synthetic rubber manufacturing facilities are bombed, and most meaningful work ceases. The local German citizens routinely vent their anger upon the inmates and beatings are common. Meanwhile, Levi continues to be aware of the many forms of '"organizing" in which inmates engage. Several are briefly described.

During this period Levi meets an Italian civilian worker—a free man—named Lorenzo. Lorenzo and Levi develop a sincere and simple friendship, and for six months, Lorenzo gives Levi a part of his daily ration, occasional clothes, and other small items. This simple act of kindness undoubtedly saves Levi's life; Lorenzo, simple and good, never asks for a reward.

Chapter 13 "October, 1944,"

Chapter 13 "October, 1944," Summary and Analysis

During the events of this chapter, Levi has been imprisoned within Auschwitz for about eight months—he will survive another three months before freedom. The chapter begins with a verb tense shift—occasionally encountered throughout the text but not to the degree exhibited here. The chapter is narrated from the first-person plural point of view in the present tense; whereas, the general text is presented from the first-person singular point of view in the past tense. This shift gives the chapter an immediacy and relevancy not typically found in autobiographical material.

Having survived much of the winter during the early months of 1944, Levi and the other inmates are keenly aware of the horrors and peril of the impending winter, and they view its slow arrival with dread. The hunger and the cold they have experienced transcend language. To say simply that one is 'hungry' or 'cold' does not convey adequate meaning. Levi considers the possibility of an entirely new language being created within the forced labor camps to adequately convey the meaning of the experiences. As the cold arrives, the Nazis have huge tents erected in the camp fields, and rumors circulate that a massive *selekcja*, or selection, will shortly occur. During selections, those deemed ill, weak or otherwise unsuitable are culled from the workers and murdered.

As the selection looms, those sick or weak workers fall into a gloomy despair, often accompanied by extensive self-delusion. Thus, aged and sick workers convince themselves that they are hale and hearty. By common consent, individuals asked to render opinions are always optimistic. As rumored, the selection in October 1944, not only occurs but is extensive. Levi offers a fairly detailed description of the mechanics of the selection process. Those selected know they have been selected and spend the next few days living with the knowledge that they will soon be murdered. As a concession, they are given a double ration in the interim. Levi, spared selection, reviews his own inspection and concludes that his identification card was accidentally swapped with that of a younger, healthier man who followed him in inspection. Thus, the younger and healthier man is murdered while Levi remains alive. Whether this is actually the case or simply survivor's guilt is, of course, not resolvable. The chapter concludes with a brief but powerful consideration of thankfulness and divinity.

Chapter 14 "Kraus,"

Chapter 14 "Kraus," Summary and Analysis

Chapter 14 is dedicated nearly entirely to the consideration of Kraus Pbli, a fellow inmate. Kraus is not exceptional and, within the framework of the autobiography, can be interpreted as representative of the vast majority of individuals who were murdered at Auschwitz after several months of starvation and forced labor. Kraus, Levi, Gounan, Clausner, and a few others are digging a deep hole in the muddy earth. Kraus, a Hungarian, is tall and thin, wears glasses and has a small face. He is fairly simple and works too hard and fast—especially when he is not being directly supervised. The other inmates hate Kraus because he never slows the pace. After working in the mud for several hours, the work group takes a break for lunch. Kraus is unusually despondent and teeters on the verge of abject depression.

Levi speaks to Kraus in German—a language Kraus poorly understands but the only language they share in common. Levi explains that he had a dream the previous evening. In the dream he had been at home with his family, sitting at a table spread with copious food. The doorbell sounded, and Levi got up to answer the door. He discovered Kraus, now clean, well-nourished and dressed as a free man. Kraus had brought bread, was invited inside and received as a guest and friend. After sharing dinner, Levi and Kraus had gone to bed in good beds and slept well.

Kraus is enthusiastic and his spirits are briefly lifted. Levi has made up the dream, has made up the particulars. He looks at Kraus with pity, knowing that he will never survive more than a few weeks—he is too simple, too trusting. Levi has briefly assisted Kraus, but immediately severs all emotion to the young man knowing that such attachments are not suitable for one who will survive.

Chapter 15 "*Die drei Leute vom Labor*,"

Chapter 15 "Die drei Leute vom Labor," Summary and Analysis

The chapter title is retained in German and could perhaps be rendered in English as "The Three People of the Laboratory.". After the October selection, twenty-one men remain from Levi's original shipment of ninety-six men; the other seventy-five have been murdered during the preceding eight months. The despondent survivors wonder how many of them will survive until summer. The winter weather, at least, prevents aerial bombardment, and camp life returns to routine and work. The Chemical Kommando to which Levi is assigned is categorized as an 'inside' labor force and thus is not issued any winter clothing. Nevertheless, they usually work outside. One prolonged labor assignment is the task of hauling sacks of caustic chemical products from one location to another. The chemicals chafe and burn away skin, and their caustic smell permeates clothing. Levi and the other chemists scoff at the prior chemical examination and the supposed privilege it supposedly extended. New arrivals bring stories of mass murders and pogroms.

Then against all odds, it is finally announced that Levi, Brackier, and Kandel have been selected to work in the Laboratory. Alberto congratulates Levi as he is led away with the two other men. They immediately receive newer clothing and are informed that they will receive minor preferential treatments. Over the next few months, they are indeed put to work inside a laboratory. Instead of performing harsh physical labor in the winter cold, they perform light, skilled work inside a heated building. Opportunities for petty theft and "organization" abound, and Levi's situation markedly improves. Levi maintains his friendship with Alberto, and, between the two of them, they manage to secure a remarkable number of benefits. The laboratory is also staffed by three civilian workers, who are young women. The women treat the inmates as if they were ambulatory excrement, and Levi is constantly amazed at their continuous and flippant conversations.

Chapter 16 "The Last One,"

Chapter 16 "The Last One," Summary and Analysis

By Christmas, Levi and Alberto have become prominent inmates, and their work group has two large soup tureens of camp manufacture. Lorenzo, Levi's civilian friend, brings daily soup rations and occasional bread. The powerful Henri openly greets them as equals and occasionally includes them in some "organization" activities. Even the nearly-criminally insane Elias considers them powerful enough to publicly acknowledge. Levi finds his moral compass adrift but ignores the problem in favor of survival. Some of the chapter is given over to a detailed description of three methods of "organization" practiced by Levi and Alberto. They demonstrate the novel thinking required for survival and illustrate how even tiny advantages—in one case a few sheets of colored paper—can be worked into considerable amounts of food.

One day, the inmates are lined up to witness an execution—Levi sees a total of fourteen executions by hanging during his eleven months of incarceration. The man being executed is accused of being involved in the explosive destruction of one of the crematoriums at Birkenau by the *Sonderkommando*. Whereas the Nazis clearly consider his death by hanging to be a shameful way to die, the other inmates watch him die and greatly respect him as a man, while they simultaneously consider themselves to be cowards. The condemned man calls out in solidarity from the gallows, but all of the assembled prisoners are too cowed to respond. The chapter title refers to this condemned, executed man—the last man absolutely to refuse moral destruction by the Nazi regime.

Chapter 17 "The Story of Ten Days,"

Chapter 17 "The Story of Ten Days," Summary and Analysis

The final chapter of the autobiography is organized much like a journal covering the ten days leading up to January 27, 1944. Each day is considered in some detail and the chapter is the longest within the text, comprising about thirteen percent of the total pages of the autobiography.

Levi contracts scarlet fever and is sent to the infectious diseases ward of the Ka-Be—it is essentially a death sentence. He is bunked with a dozen other men in a tiny room; they all suffer from a variety of highly-contagious diseases and receive relatively little medical treatment. Those who recover are sent back to work; most die or are selected and murdered. While he passes the hours, Levi hears the constantly sound of the artillery of the approaching Soviet army. One day the barber arrives and informs Levi that the entire camp will soon be evacuated. As expected, the following day the camp is indeed evacuated of prisoners. All those who are able are lined up and marched away into the freezing winter weather. Those within Ka-Be are divided in opinion, with many feeling that to remain behind is a certain death sentence. Many sick inmates force themselves from bed and join the lines of evacuees only to collapse and be executed within minutes. Levi considers leaving but gives up the idea as suicidal. Alberto pays Levi a final, furtive visit, and then during the night of January 18, 1945, the camp evacuation is completed. The next morning a final distribution of rations occurs, along with widespread, but apparently random, executions. That evening a series of mines is exploded, devastating most of the numerous camps comprising Auschwitz. The inmates are stunned to peek out the window and discover empty guard towers.

Over the following days, Levi and two other patients, Arthur and Charles, form an alliance and began to salvage food. They secure a cast iron stove and fuel, blankets, rudimentary clothing, and various valuable objects. Arthur and Charles, two Frenchmen, are recovered enough to be fairly useful physically; whereas, Levi's contribution is mostly verbal from his long experience in the camp. Occasional Germans wander by but are easily avoided.

Life quickly begins to return to a moral, civilized practice as Levi, Arthur, and Charles determine they will care for the half-dozen other sicker inmates in their own room. They must turn away hundreds of other patients, but at least they can make an effort with their own bedfellows. Levi gets to know the other men and briefly relates their stories of life before the war. Obviously, the situation is rapidly changing. After four days, food is becoming scarce, and the camp has dissolved into a catastrophe of filth, corpses and destruction. Levi and his compatriots begin to search outside of the barbed wire enclosure and even penetrate into the SS camp where they discover plentiful food, excellent clothing, and numerous useful items. That night, however, one of the patients in the room dies. A few days later a huge stash of potatoes is located and for several

days all of the survivors gorge themselves. A few days later still, a general recognition of freedom and liberty pervades the camp—former inmates come and go as they please and are able, and singing is heard. Deaths continue but gradually abate. The autobiography concludes on January 27, 1945, as the Russian army arrives and officially liberates Auschwitz. Of the fourteen men in Levi's room, at least six die within the following weeks from complications of starvation, exhaustion and infection. Levi says that at least four others from his room survived the war. Given this statistic, it appears that remaining behind was the preferable course of action—of course, this was unknowable at the time of evacuation.

Characters

Primo Levi

Alberto

Henri

Resnyk

Schlome

Steinlauf

Null Achtzen

Walter, Schmulek, and Piero Sonnino

Pannwitz

Lorenzo

Kraus Pbli

Frdulein Liczba, Frau Meyer, and the Polish store-keeper

Objects/Places

Fossoli Detention Camp

The Fossoli Detention Camp, near Modena, was a vast, Italian detention camp used to house various elements deemed undesirable by the Fascists. Levi was an inmate of the camp for several weeks and was joined there by about 650 other Italian Jews. Levi and the other Jews were eventually deported from Fossoli to Auschwitz. He describes Fossoli only in general and brief terms, and, aside from being a military prison, the camp appears to have been fairly benign.

Auschwitz

Auschwitz is the name given to a system of death and forced labor compounds located in Upper Silesia and operated by the Nazis during World War II. Levi, along with hundreds of thousands of other Jews, was forcibly deported to Auschwitz, where he was assigned to the forced labor camp of Monowitz-Buna. Most Jews were not so "fortunate" and were instead quickly murdered, their remains cremated and their ashes frequently incorporated into paving material. Auschwitz is today remembered as the site of the most horrific atrocities of the Holocaust.

Monowitz-Buna

Monowitz-Buna was a forced labor camp, which was included within the larger Auschwitz concentration camp. Whereas some portions of Auschwitz—the *Vernichtungslager*—focused on the murder and cremation of Jews, Monowitz-Buna was a forced labor camp where synthetic rubber was manufactured; *Buna* is the German word for that synthetic rubber. Levi was deemed suitable for physical labor and assigned to Monowitz-Buna, where he was incarcerated for approximately eleven months.

Lager

A *Lager* is a division within a forced labor camp which houses inmates. Given that prisoners were not allowed to move freely about, life within the larger camp system was essentially synonymous to life within the *Lager*. Levi uses the term *Lager* in a general sense throughout the autobiography—that is, the *Lager* is the camp experience. Levi describes his *Lager* as a square of about six hundred yards in length, fenced off by two razor-wire enclosures, the inner one electrified. The *Lager* consists of sixty wooden huts, called Blocks, which house the prisoners.

Hdftlinge

Hdftlinge, or prisoners, form the bulk of the men inside of the various forced labor camps. Levi, for example, is a *Hdftling*. Typical *Hdftlinge* have no rights and are used as beasts of burden prior to being murdered. Some *Hdftlinge*, generally those of non-Jewish extraction, receive preferential treatment and are exempted from work. Many of these are assigned to be Kapos, or inmate-overseers, and they are a particularly vicious and hated group.

"Organization"

The term "organization" was camp slang for an extra-legal operation or scam that allowed one to secure supplies—particularly food—beyond one's allotment. Levi explains several "organizations" in particular detail and notes that a virtually limitless number of strategies existed. An "organizer" could be small—for example, merely an opportunistic petty thief—or large. For example, some of the assistants in the Ka-Be would take the spoons and bowls from all arriving patients and then sell them on the black market. Levi considers the morality of "organization" at great length within the autobiography, concluding that as it was required for survival, it was, by definition, morally good.

Selekcja, or Selection

A "selection" is the name given to the process whereby a group of individuals is sorted into two sub-groups. The ill, weak, or otherwise undesirables are "selected" out of the main group and subsequently murdered. The remaining individuals are retained as slave labor in the camps. Upon arrival, all groups were immediately subjected to a harsh and massive selection, which resulted in the aged, young, ill or injured, and nearly all the women to be immediately sent away to be murdered. Subsequent selections consigned the weak, the ill or the injured to death.

Ka-Be

Ka-Be is the camp abbreviation of *Krankenbau*, or infirmary. Inmates who present at Ka-Be with insufficient medical cause are beat up, while those who present with grave illness are summarily murdered. Those who do not recuperate quickly are likewise murdered. After sustaining a severe ankle wound, Levi is admitted to Ka-Be where he recuperates and is then sent back to work. Later he is again admitted to Ka-Be with scarlet fever—an illness which, ironically, probably saves his life.

Bread and Soup

The primary foods provided are blocks of bread and thin soup. The thick chunk of coarse bread is measured out by weight and is an insufficient amount. The daily soup is thin and watery, usually of cabbage, turnip or potato. The soup provides so much liquid, in fact, that inmates who routinely drink water become bloated and sick and quickly die of dysentery or dropsy. Experienced inmates always jockey for position at the tail end of the soup line—those at the front of the line are served quickly but receive only watery broth. In general, the ration is sufficient to allow an inmate to work for a few months while slowly starving to death. Obtaining additional food is one of the primary activities of all camp inmates, and slivers of bread serve as ready currency.

Muselmann (alternatively spelled musselman within the text)

Muselmann was a term originating in Auschwitz and used among inmates to refer to those suffering from starvation and exhaustion and who were mentally resigned to their impending death. Beyond simply starving, the apathetic listlessness regarding their own survival was a hallmark of one named a "muselmann." Levi offers the alternative appellation of "the drowned" in chapter nine.

Chemical Kommando, or Kommando 98

A work group ostensibly concerned with operating the chemical laboratory at Monowitz-Buna. In actuality, the work group frequently was assigned to typical hard labor. Levi is assigned to the Chemical Kommando and after several weeks enjoys the notable privilege of usually working inside performing light duty. The assignment, made possible by Levi's education in chemistry, undoubtedly saved his life.

Themes

Killed In Our Spirit Long Before Our Anonymous Death

Levi spends a great deal of effort in the autobiography developing the theme of the destruction of the human will or soul before the death of the actual physical body. For many millions, forcible deportation to the concentration camps meant murder and cremation; this was not the case for Levi. He was deemed capable of physical labor and instead of being instantly murdered, was assigned to a forced labor camp. These forced labor camps were composed of young men in excellent physical condition who could perform extended and demanding physical labor in horrible working conditions. Even given their initial healthy state, survival in the labor camps averaged only three months.

These few months were filled with psychological attacks on dignity and demands upon normal morality, which could never be satisfied. The entire camp experience was designed to ridicule, belittle and degrade. Inmates were shaved, clothed in rags, starved, beaten, housed in impossible conditions and subjected to frequent, capricious violence. Even an entire vocabulary and methodology of treatment was evolved to isolate and destroy the individual personality. This brutal program was so successful that inmates often ceased mental defiance months before their eventual physical destruction. Levi comments that such men—often referred to as *Musselman* or "the drowned"—were existing in a state that could not be called living. Levi states that their physical death was not their "real" death, which had occurred earlier. Even the long-term survivors, such as Henri, Elias, and Levi, were forced to abandon previously-held morals and ethics and convert to the law of the camp—those who are strong enough to take, must take to survive. And of course those taken from, "the drowned," were thus hastened toward their anonymous death.

This Life is War

Within the context of the autobiography, "this life" refers only to the transient existence of prisoners within the Lager. Levi frequently considers the inadequacy of normal language to describe existence within the concentration camp but does not stop from describing the brutal moral compromises required for existence. The war of survival required that one cast off the trappings of one's prior life and accept the new situation as real—many were not able to make the adjustment and were entirely defeated within days or weeks of their arrival. The second step required was to adapt to the conditions and to begin to gain any tiny, available advantage. Levi details numerous disparate ways that these advantages were created and used by various inmates. The third stop required was to enlarge upon any advantage and thereby become nominally capable of survival. As Levi points out, however, any advantage secured was a penalty for some other inmate. Thus, survival in Auschwitz entailed climbing to the top of the pile of one's

peers. To gain advantage, one must necessarily stand atop the stolen advantage of other desperate, condemned men.

Levi's war of survival was that of morality and the intellectual ability to adjust one's personal values to fit the reality of the situation. Those who could not so do quickly perished. The reality of life in Auschwitz, however, dictated that the weak must be preyed upon by the strong in order for the strong to survive. As the weak were doomed anyway, this situation hastened their death but did not *de facto* cause it. Survivors, often wracked with guilt about their own actions, were those who could divorce themselves from the normal morality of their civilized upbringing and wage war against their fellow inmates.

The Great Insanity of the Third Germany

One of the dominant themes of the autobiography is that of the social upheaval and vile practices of the Nazi Third Reich. Levi refers to this as the collective great insanity of the third Germany. Levi chronicles this paradigm—he bears witness—but he does not analyze it or attempt to explain it, instead concluding that for him, it is inexplicable. The dominant feature of Nazi insanity is the practice of institutionalized genocide, whereby millions—Jews, Poles, criminals, and other elements deemed "undesirable"—were forcibly deported to concentration camps where they were mass murdered and their remains cremated. The degradation of Jews extended even beyond their anonymous death—the ashes from the crematorium were often used as industrial products to, for example, manufacture new roadways.

The great insanity spread further than institutionalized genocide and mass murder and impacted most individual German's views about race and politics. For example, the famous industrial chemist Dr. Pannwitz viewed Levi as one might view a fish in an aquarium. The men were academic equals and professional peers, but Pannwitz regards Levi much as a trained monkey that, curiously, has a chemistry education. Another example is Frdulein Liczba, the young woman who assists in the chemical laboratory. While thousands are murdered daily around her, she concerns herself with the difficulties of Christmas travel imposed upon her by the war. Her idle prattle is not merely an act—when she sweeps the floor she sweeps over the feet of Levi because, for her, he simply does not exist. On the one occasion when Levi attempts to address her, she turns away, complains to the overseer and refers to him as a stinking Jew. Obviously, Pannwitz and Liczba have been tinged by the great insanity.

Style

Perspective

Primo Levi was arrested and subsequently forcibly deported to Auschwitz in February, 1944. He was deemed suitable for forced labor and assigned to the Monowitz-Buna forced labor camp, where he survived for approximately eleven months. In January, 1945, he became ill with scarlet fever and was incarcerated in the camp's infectious diseases unit of the hospital. He was there when the Nazis evacuated the camp before the advancing Russian army and deemed unfit for evacuation, so he was abandoned with several hundred other sick prisoners. Although many died, the survivors were liberated by the Russians, who also provided medical assistance. Levi thus survived the Holocaust and returned home to Turin, Italy and within a few years had written the first edition of the autobiography currently being considered.

Levi, uniquely positioned to describe survival in Auschwitz, states that his reason for writing the autobiography is the moral requirement to bear witness to Nazi atrocities. He states in the preface that he does not intend specifically to catalogue specific crimes or violent acts as many of those have been reported elsewhere. Instead, his purpose in writing is to examine the nature of subjugation and the processes—moral, ethical and intellectual—that survivors used to adapt to the conditions imposed upon them. Thus, the dominant themes of the text include the great insanity of Nazi Germany, the struggle for survival and the process whereby many men's personality were purposefully destroyed long before their anonymous death.

Tone

The tone of the autobiography is often cited as its most startling aspect. Levi does not condone, but neither does he strongly condemn his experiences in Auschwitz. He states the obvious—the Holocaust was evil; many, perhaps most, German citizens were complicit in genocide; millions were murdered—but he does not dwell on these aspects of his experience. Instead, the narrative is informed by Levi's genuine interest in the processes he experienced. He related the day-to-day horror in unemotional terms—the prose is precise, demanding, and informative. For example, when Soviet aerial bombardment reduces the general area to rubble, he states "...the German civilians raged with the fury of the secure man who wakes up from a long dream of domination and sees his own ruin and is unable to understand it" (p. 118).

Another frequently noted aspect of the autobiography is the inclusion of humor. Amazing as it might seem, Levi views his experience in many ways, and he is often able to extract humor from the trivial experiences of the day-to-day struggle to survive. Thus, the tone of the autobiography is not only not poisonous, humor is in fact one of its strongest elements. The tone is engaging and allows the reader to access the text

quickly; it does not, however, prevent the material from fully developing its themes, and it does not interfere with the terrible impact of the narrative.

Structure

The 173-page autobiography is divided into seventeen enumerated and named chapters of unequal length. In general the chapters are ordered chronologically. However, as each chapter is capable of standing alone as an essay, there is necessarily a fair degree of chronological overlap between some sections. The final chapter of the text is the longest and also the most chronological—it reads nearly as a day-by-day journal and has sections which are separated by the dates of the ten days considered.

The autobiography was originally published in Italian as a limited printing in 1947. A later Italian-language revision was published in 1958. The book was translated into English in 1959, and has been in nearly continuous publication since. Most English-language printings bear the title *If This Is A Man*; only the United States versions are commonly entitled *Survival in Auschwitz*. A variety of formats, editions and revisions exist, many providing textually-relevant appendices from a variety of sources, such as biographies or interviews. Because of this, more or less biographical data regarding Primo Levi is available depending upon which version of the text one obtains. The book has been translated into numerous additional languages and is universally accepted as a classic work.

Of particular note is the use of language within the text. The bulk of the narrative is presented in English as translated from the original Italian. However the text also contains numerous phrases in German and French and presents several words in a variety of additional languages—these passages are not translated. Usually they are indicative of dialogue between the author and another individual and, as such, they allow the reader to experience the confusion of attempting to communicate in a foreign language not well-understood. This minor theme is augmented by the author's occasional notation that his "normal life" language is entirely insufficient to describe his Auschwitz survival.

Quotes

"It grieves me now that I have forgotten his plain, outspoken words, the words of ex-sergeant Steinlauf of the Austro-Hungarian army, Iron Cross of the '14-'18 war. It grieves me because it means that I have to translate his uncertain Italian and his quiet manner of speaking of a good soldier into my language of an incredulous man. But this was the sense, not forgotten either then or later: that precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization. We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last—the power to refuse our consent. So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because the regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, not to begin to die." (Chapter 3, p. 41)

"I tried to ask him if he knew when they would let us enter. He turned to the nurse who resembled him like a twin and was smoking in the corner; they talked and laughed together without replying, as if I was not there. Then one of them took my arm and looked at my number and then both laughed still more strongly. Everyone knows that the 174000s are the Italian Jews, the well-known Italian Jews who arrived two months ago, all lawyers, all with degrees, who were more than a hundred and are now only forty; the ones who do not know how to work, and let their bread be stolen, and are slapped from the morning to the evening. The Germans call them '*zwei linke Hdnde*' (two left hands), and even the Polish Jews despise them as they do not speak Yiddish.

"The nurse points to my ribs to show the other, as if I was a corpse in an anatomy class: he alludes to my eyelids and my swollen cheeks and my thin neck, he stoops to press on my tibia with his thumb, and shows the other the deep impression that his finger leaves in the pale flesh, as if it was wax.

"I wish I had never spoken to the Pole: I feel as if I had never in all my life undergone an affront worse than this. The nurse, meanwhile, seems to have finished his demonstration in his language which I do not understand and which sounds terrible. He turns to me and in near-German, charitably, tells me the conclusion: '*Du Jude, kaput. Du schnell Krematorium fertig.*' (You Jew, finished. You soon ready for crematorium.)" (Chapter 4, p. 49)

"We try in vain, when the nightmare itself or the discomforts wake us, to extricate the various elements and drive them back, separately, out of the field of our present attention, so as to defend our sleep from their intrusion: but as soon as we close our eyes, once again we feel our brain start up, beyond our control; it knocks and hums, incapable of rest, it fabricates phantasms and terrible symbols, and without rest projects and shapes their images, as a grey fog, on to the screen of our dreams.

"But for the whole duration of the night, cutting across the alternating sleep, waking and nightmares, the expectancy and terror of the moment of the reveille keeps watch. By means of that mysterious faculty of which many are aware, even without watches we are able to calculate the moment with close accuracy. At the hour of the reveille, which varies from season to season but always falls a fair time before dawn, the camp bell rings for a long time, and the night-guard in every hut goes off duty; he switches on the light, gets up, stretches himself and pronounces the daily condemnation: '*Aufstehen,*' or more often in Polish: '*Wstavac.*'" (Chapter 5, p. 63)

"For human nature is such that grief and pain—even simultaneously suffered—do not add up as a whole in our consciousness, but hide, the lesser behind the greater, according to a definite law of perspective. It is providential and is our means of surviving the camp. And this is the reason why so often in free life one hears it said that man is never content. In fact it is not a question of a human incapacity for a state of absolute happiness, but of an ever-insufficient knowledge of the complex nature of the state of unhappiness; so that the single name of the major cause is given to all its causes, which are composite and set out in an order of urgency. And if the most immediate cause of stress comes to an end, you are grievously amazed to see that another one lies behind; and in reality a whole series of others." (Chapter 7, p. 73)

"In conclusion: theft in Buna, punished by the civil direction, is authorized and encouraged by the SS; theft in camp, severely repressed by the SS, is considered by the civilians as a normal exchange operation; theft among Hdftlinge is generally punished, but the punishment strikes the thief and the victim with equal gravity. We now invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Larger of the words 'good' and 'evil', 'just' and 'unjust'; let everybody judge, on the basis of the picture we have outlined and on the examples given above, how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire." (Chapter 8, p. 86)

"To sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp. Experienced showed that only exceptionally could one survive more than three months in this way. All the musselmans who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea. On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selections or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmdnner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand." (Chapter 9, p. 90)

"Balla has a pencil and we all crowd around him. We are not sure if we still know how to write, we want to try.

"Kohlenwasserstoffe, Massenwirkungsgesetz. The German names of compounds and laws float back into my memory. I feel grateful towards my brain: I have not paid much attention to it, but it still serves me so well." (Chapter 10, p. 104)

"Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger', we say 'tiredness', 'fear', 'pain', we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing near." (Chapter 13, p. 123)

"Now everyone is busy scraping the bottom of his bowl with his spoon so as not to waste the last drops of the soup; a confused, metallic clatter, signifying the end of the day. Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk on the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen.

"Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking any more? Can Kuhn fail to realize that the next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, with nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?

"If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer." (Chapter 13, p. 130)

"To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it has not been easy, nor quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze; from our side you have nothing more to fear; no acts of violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment." (Chapter 16, p. 150)

"*27 January*. Dawn. On the floor, the shameful wreck of skin and bones, the Sumogyi thing.

"There are more urgent tasks: we cannot wash ourselves, so that we dare not touch him until we have cooked and eaten. And besides: '*...rien de si dygoutant que les dybordements*,' said Charles justly; the latrine had to be emptied. The living are more demanding; the dead can wait. We began to work as on every day.

"The Russians arrived while Charles and I were carrying Sumogyi a little distance outside. He was very light. We overturned the stretcher on the grey snow.

"Charles took off his beret. I regretted not having a beret.

"Of the eleven of the *Infektionsabteilung* Sumogyi was the only one to die in the ten days. Sertelet, Cagnolati, Towarowski, Lakmaker and Dorget (I have not spoken of him so far; he was a French industrialist who, after an operation for peritonitis, fell ill of nasal diphtheria) died some weeks later in the temporary Russian hospital of Auschwitz. In April, at Katowice, I met Schenck and Alcalai in good health. Arthur has reached his family happily and Charles has taken up his teacher's profession again; we have exchanged long letters and I hope to see him again one day." (Chapter 17, pp. 172-173)

Topics for Discussion

Levi comments that many Italian Jews had voluntarily surrendered to the Fascist authorities "...absurdly—'to be in conformity with the law'" (p. 14). Most citizens in most nations ruled by law consider conformance with the law to be a basic tenet of civilization. Yet in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the laws demanded impossible things. Discuss your probable reaction to laws, which would legalize and subsequently authorize genocide.

When Levi entered Auschwitz he passed under an infamous gate bearing the words '*Arbeit Macht Frei*', or "Work Gives Freedom." Contrast the probable intended interpretation of this sign with the darkly ironic truth it encapsulated. Within the context of Auschwitz, what would constitute freedom?

One of the first people Levi meets in Lager is a man named Steinlauf, who assures Levi that personal bathing is a necessity for survival—even though the bathing was physically ineffectual at cleanliness. Levi eventually comes to believe that Steinlauf was correct. Discuss Steinlauf's rationale for bathing (you might want to review Levi's summary of Steinlauf's argument on pp. 40-41).

Levi describes one inmate, *Null Achtzehn*, as "nothing more than an involucre, like the slough of certain insects which one finds on the banks of swamps" (p. 42). Discuss this powerful and exact imagery—how, exactly, is *Null Achtzehn* like an involucre?

Levi reports that most inmates shared a bunk; thus, two men would sleep in a single bed that measured about two feet wide. Discuss how you might arrange your body to maximize the space available. Do you think you could sleep under those circumstances?

Levi states that free men are absolutely convinced that life has a purpose and that they think and talk often about the putative purpose. What was the purpose of life within Auschwitz?

Do you think that it was morally wrong for a stronger inmate to steal food from a weaker inmate? Why or why not? Do you think that everyday morality had any role within Auschwitz?

What do you think the author means when he writes "I judge him and Pannwitz and the innumerable others like him, big and small, in Auschwitz and everywhere" (p. 108)? How do you judge Alex and Pannwitz and the other willing executioners of Nazi Germany?

Levi relates how a civilian named Lorenzo routinely provided him with additional food and resources. Lorenzo never looked for a reward for his behavior. Why do you think Lorenzo helped Levi survive?

Levi hypothesizes that had the Lager system persisted indefinitely, a new and brutal language would have emerged, which would be capable of expressing the horror, misery and evil present in everyday life within the forced labor camps (refer to p. 123). What do you imagine such a language would sound like? Do you think it would be capable of expressing such concepts as forgiveness, love, and honor?

Levi pretends to have a dream about another inmate named Kraus Pbli. In the dream the two men have enough to eat and then sleep in nice beds in a home full of relatives. Why do you think Kraus found this dream so intriguing? Do you think that such dreams were actually possible in the death camps?

In late 1944, Levi worked in a chemistry laboratory with a few other inmates and some civilian workers. Three of the workers were women. Even though the women treat them horribly, the men find their presence acceptable. Do you think that any of the prisoners found the women sexually interesting?

Levi watches an execution in which the condemned man calls out "'*Kamaraden, ich bin der Letz!*' (Comrades, I am the last one!)" (p. 149). Levi agrees and even names the chapter *The Last One*. Discuss what the statement means—the last one of what?

Do you think you would have survived Auschwitz?