

Dehumanization Survival and Memory in *If This Is a Man*

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Introduction

"If This Is a Man" is a memoir written by Primo Levi which records his experiences in a labour camp during World War II. Primo Levi was an Italian Jew who was captured in December 1943 while hiding in the mountains with fellow anti-fascists. He is taken to a detention camp, where he is later boarded on a freight train. All the prisoners travel for numerous days in deteriorating conditions, and during the journey, Levi learns that they are on their way to Auschwitz. After reaching the prisoner camp named Buna, they are striped, their heads shaved, and a prisoner number tattooed on their arms. The horrors that follow give readers an insight into the cruelties and dehumanization humans are capable of inflicting on each other. It forces the readers to seek an answer to a question similar to the author's: "If this is a man." Throughout the book, Levi makes references to Dante's *Inferno*, as his experience in the labour camp was no less than a journey through hell.

A Journey Of Dehumanization

The memoir by Levi is an account of the dehumanization inflicted on Jews by the Nazis. Levi tries to comprehend the reality of human existence in circumstances where one is stripped of everything. This stance forces the reader to approach the text with a more experiential stance rather than an observatory one. It is not a tale of heroics but rather a narration of suffering and chance. The series of demeaning activities sought to destroy the spirit of the prisoner who miraculously survived famine and hard labour each day. The prisoners at the camp did not distinguish existence in terms. Rather, or death rather, the only distinction for them was human or dehumanized. For them, being alive was measured by the degree to which one's customary humanity was forfeited. Good and evil became mere theoretical concepts and were replaced by luck or chance.

Upon arrival, Levi and his fellow prisoners are introduced to a long list of rules and grinding work schedules. With little food and water available, Levi starts feeling the initial signs of starvation on the very first day. He and his fellows are beaten, starved, and forced to work to the point of fatal exhaustion while thousands of Jewish prisoners are sentenced to death in the gas chambers at an extermination camp nearby. Levi sustains injuries while carrying heavy loads. The prisoners are given very little food to eat, mostly a few pieces of bread and a thin soup with a few pieces of vegetables lurking at the bottom. To the Nazis, these prisoners were nothing more than a number, or "pieces", or "cattle". With each passing day, resources become scarcer and during air raids, prisoners are barred

from bomb shelters. Levi meets Lorenzo during an air raid, and his kindness helps him survive the camp. By winter, only Levi and another twenty Italian Jews are left out of the ninety-six who came to Auschwitz with him. The last five chapters of the book present a loss of self-identity for Levi and his fellow prisoners and shed light on the moments of certain death and chance survival that enable him to continue. He contracts scarlet fever and suffers the death of many of his fellow men until ultimately surviving through the arrival of the Russian soldiers.

Arbitrary Notions

The world is often governed by the arbitrary conceptions of luck and chance, and this is one of the primary themes in Levi's book. He attributes all events from his random capture to his survival at the Auschwitz camp to chance occurrence and as being lucky. Levi's work as a professional scientist, however, keeps pushing him towards rationality and to seek a logical reason for these events. This urge to answer the most difficult questions is the basis of human curiosity, and this quest for knowledge became an important tool for Levi's survival. He understood that there were things that had to be done to endure the horrors that surrounded him. He also hoped that he would not transcend into the brutalities himself. He set aside the goal to be released and started focusing on day-to-day functions, analyzing individuals and groups around him to gain insight into the art of survival. He noticed that by extending himself to others through small acts of kindness whenever possible, he was able to retain a sense of self. It made life considerably bearable for him and others.

The title of the book implies the main theme of Levi's book. It forces the readers to think about how men could direct such atrocities towards their fellow men and treat them as if they are not human. He tried to make sense of the driving force behind such brutalities. While sometimes he attributed it to hatred, other times he could not find a reason. He sees his fellowmen being struck and clubbed for no apparent reason, and he wonders how one can strike his fellowmen even in the absence of rage. He believes that assuming strangers as an "enemy" leads to the formation of such camps. Forbidding people from drinking water while there is a faucet dripping water and people are dying of thirst does not seem to make any sense to anyone who is humane, even in the least sense.

Survival

Levi referred to the Auschwitz camp as a "gigantic biological and social experiment". It forced the prisoners to live under circumstances, the likes of which are unmatched in human history. It was during such conditions that prisoners were forced to make choices for survival. While some resorted to helping their fellowmen by sharing food and resources, others turned to methods of deceiving the system and stealing resources to fulfil their needs. Yet others participated in power struggles and sought to oppress their own. Levi, however, takes a no-blame stance towards each one of them due to the harsh conditions of the camp. He believes that the same moral and ethical principles do not apply to them as they were just trying to survive. These aren't conscious choices but rather strategies

adopted under misery and duress (Levi, 1959).