



from **SURVIVAL**
in Auschwitz

Primo Levi

BACKGROUND Primo Levi (1919–1987) was an Italian chemist. In 1944, he was deported to Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp in Poland, where he remained for one year. Levi wrote about his nightmarish experiences in objective, scientific detail, believing that subjective commentary was unnecessary and that the events would speak for themselves. The following excerpt from his memoir describes the ritual in which prisoners were selected for condemnation.

Today is working Sunday, *Arbeitssonntag*: we work until 1 P.M., then we return to camp for the shower, shave and general control for skin diseases and lice. And in the yards, everyone knew mysteriously that the selection would be today.

The news arrived, as always, surrounded by a halo of contradictory or suspect details: the selection in the infirmary took place this morning; the percentage was seven per cent of the whole camp, thirty, fifty per cent of the patients. At Birkenau,¹ the crematorium chimney has been smoking for ten days. Room has to be made for an enormous convoy arriving from the Poznan ghetto.² The young tell the young that all the old ones will be chosen. The healthy tell the healthy that only the ill will be chosen. Specialists will be excluded. German Jews will be excluded. Low Numbers³ will be excluded. You will be chosen. I will be excluded.

At 1 P.M. exactly the yard empties in orderly fashion, and for two hours the gray unending army files past the two control stations where, as on every day, we are counted and recounted, and past the military band which for two hours without interruption plays, as on every day, those marches to which we must synchronize our steps at our entrance and our exit.

1. **Birkenau** (bür'kən-ou): Also known as Auschwitz II, this camp stood about two miles from an older camp, called Auschwitz I. Between 1 million and 4 million people were murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau during the years 1942–1945.

2. **Poznan** (pōz'nän') **ghetto**: the area of the Polish city of Poznan in which Jews were forced to live.

3. **Low Numbers**: prisoners with low identification numbers.



The German slogan *Arbeit macht frei* was posted above the gate to Auschwitz. It means "Work will make you free."

It seems like every day, the kitchen chimney smokes as usual, the distribution of the soup is already beginning. But then the bell is heard, and at that moment we realize that we have arrived.

²⁰ Because this bell always sounds at dawn, when it means the reveille;⁴ but if it sounds during the day, it means "*Blocksperr*," enclosure in huts, and this happens when there is a selection to prevent anyone avoiding it, or when those selected leave for the gas, to prevent anyone seeing them leave.

Our *Blockältester*⁵ knows his business. He has made sure that we have all entered, he has the door locked, he has given everyone his card with his number, name, profession, age and nationality and he has ordered everyone to undress completely, except for shoes. We wait like this, naked, with the card in our hands, for the commission to reach our hut. We are hut 48, but one can never tell if they are going to begin at hut 1

4. *reveille* (rèv'è-lè): a signal used to awaken people.

5. *Blockältester* (blö'käl-tès'ter) *German*: block elder—a prisoner cooperating with the German guards by serving as the head of a block, or barracks.



The shoes of victims, on display at the Auschwitz Museum

or hut 60. At any rate, we can rest quietly at least for an hour, and there is no reason
30 why we should not get under the blankets on the bunk and keep warm.

Many are already drowsing when a barrage of orders, oaths and blows proclaims the imminent arrival of the commission. The *Blockältester* and his helpers, starting at the end of the dormitory, drive the crowd of frightened, naked people in front of them and cram them in the *Tagesraum* which is the Quartermaster's office.⁶ The *Tagesraum* is a room seven yards by four: when the drive is over, a warm and compact human mass is jammed into the *Tagesraum*, perfectly filling all the corners, exercising such a pressure on the wooden walls as to make them creak. . . .

The *Blockältester* has closed the connecting-door and has opened the other two which lead from the dormitory and the *Tagesraum* outside. Here, in front of the two
40 doors, stands the arbiter⁷ of our fate, an SS subaltern.⁸ On his right is the *Blockältester*, on his left, the quartermaster of the hut. Each one of us, as he comes naked out of the *Tagesraum* into the cold October air, has to run the few steps between the two

6. **Quartermaster's office:** the office of the person who distributes food and clothing to the prisoners.

7. **arbiter** (är'bī-tēr): judge; decider.

8. **SS subaltern:** a low-ranking officer in the Nazi special security force.

doors, give the card to the SS man and enter the dormitory door. The SS man, in the fraction of a second between two successive crossings, with a glance at one's back and front, judges everyone's fate, and in turn gives the card to the man on his right or his left, and this is the life or death of each of us. In three or four minutes a hut of two hundred men is "done," as is the whole camp of twelve thousand men in the course of the afternoon.

Jammed in the charnel-house⁹ of the *Tagesraum*, I gradually felt the human pressure
50 around me slacken, and in a short time it was my turn. Like everyone, I passed by with a brisk and elastic step, trying to hold my head high, my chest forward and my muscles contracted and conspicuous. With the corner of my eye I tried to look behind my shoulders, and my card seemed to end on the right.

As we gradually come back into the dormitory we are allowed to dress ourselves. Nobody yet knows with certainty his own fate, it has first of all to be established whether the condemned cards were those on the right or the left. By now there is no longer any point in sparing each other's feelings with superstitious scruples. Everybody crowds around the oldest, the most wasted-away, and most "muselmann";¹⁰ if their cards went to the left, the left is certainly the side of the condemned.

60 Even before the selection is over, everybody knows that the left was effectively the "*schlechte Seite*," the bad side. There have naturally been some irregularities: René, for example, so young and robust, ended on the left; perhaps it was because he has glasses, perhaps because he walks a little stooped like a myope,¹¹ but more probably because of a simple mistake. . . .

There is nothing surprising about these mistakes: the examination is too quick and summary, and in any case, the important thing for the Lager¹² is not that the most useless prisoners be eliminated, but that free posts be quickly created, according to a certain percentage previously fixed. ☞

9. **charnel-house:** vault for the bones of the dead (used here figuratively).

10. **"muselmann"** (moo'zəl-män): concentration-camp slang for a person near death from starvation.

11. **myope** (mi'öp'): nearsighted person.

12. **Lager** (lä'gər) *German:* camp.

Literary Analysis

1. **Clarify** What was the purpose of the "selection" taking place?
2. **Examine Tone** Reread lines 60–64. What is **ironic** about Levi's reference to the "simple mistake" of René's selection?
3. **Compare Texts** Both Kurt Vonnegut's "Adam" and *Survival in Auschwitz* make a comment about the value of human life in the shadow of World War II. How would you compare or contrast the statement made by each piece? Explain, citing evidence from both texts to support your answer.