

# **SURVIVORS IN AUSCHWITZ**

## **A case study of hunger, morality and the human condition**

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### **Introduction**

When Primo Levi fell to his death on April 11, 1987, many believed that he had finally yielded to the horrors of Auschwitz (Gambetta, 1999). The public, the police and many of Levi's close friends believed that Levi had resigned to Nazism. Many believed that the memories of his time in Auschwitz had led him to commit suicide, and that he was able to commit his final act because he had finished writing the final book in his series of memoirs about Auschwitz. Permeating Levi's poignant accounts of life in the camp were questions of morality, gut-wrenching commentary on hunger and discussions of the lack of humanity within the electric barbed wire confines of Auschwitz.

When Levi (1989) condemned humankind for its behaviour during the Holocaust, he was speaking not only of those who facilitated and engaged in the behaviour of Nazism, but also of those struggling to survive within the camps themselves. Levi appears to conclude that those who survived were not the best, the fittest or the greatest of people. Rather, he contends that the survivors of Auschwitz were some of the worst -- the men and women who most manipulated those around them and who mimicked, with the greatest effort, the behaviour and habits of the Nazis themselves. Those who emerged from the confines of Auschwitz were not just survivors of the Holocaust; they were actors who danced in the gray area between victim and perpetrator (Levi, 1989). Levi's most severe judgment of the survivors of the Holocaust came during a time in his life that was coupled with, if not ruled by, depression (Gambetta, 1999). His conclusions

of the men and women who avoided the Final Solution did not wholly and justly represent those who survived.

The Holocaust is remembered around the world with monuments erected to honour those who were lost. Yet little discussion continues regarding those who committed the acts (Lacpra, 1998; Levi, 2005; Bettelheim, 1960). Few wish to remember a Nazi Germany and even fewer wish to remember what occurred inside the concentration and death camps littered throughout Eastern Europe. Those who do discuss the acts of the Nazis often allude to the “barbaric” and “savage” behaviour that was perpetrated. Dominick Lacpra (1998) posits that such regressive descriptions suggest that the actions of the Nazis were different than what would be perpetrated by “humane” men and women. The behaviour is constructed as one where modernity or a lack thereof is responsible, suggesting there is a difference between us, the humane, and them, the savage and barbaric. Lacpra suggests that such descriptions divert responsibility and conjure up a divide that exists only in thought.

The Holocaust has been categorized as a historical event and is remembered as such because the action of the persecution of the Holocaust is not unfamiliar to history or to humankind. History is saturated with stories of persecution for various political and religious reasons. Bruno Bettelheim (1960) explores this notion by stating that:

Large numbers of men were exterminated in other centuries too. Germany itself was depopulated by the Thirty Years War, during which millions of civilians died. And if two Atomic bombs had not sufficed, maybe as many millions in Japan would have been exterminated as in the German concentration camps. War is horrible, and man's inhumanity to man even more so. Yet the importance of accounts on the extermination camps lies not in their all too familiar story but in something far more unusual and horrifying (Preface, *Auschwitz*, vii).

As Bettelheim (1960) contends, the uniqueness of the extermination camps, like Auschwitz, does not lie in the act of extermination itself. Rather, the uniqueness lies in the behaviour of those who survived compared to those who marched into the gas chambers. Such behaviour evokes questions regarding the humanity of mankind. Anthropologists have long studied societies of

brutish individuals ravaged by hunger and violence (Barth & Turnbull, 1974; Becker, 1997; Counihan, 1992; Counihan, 1999; Counihan & Van Esterik, 1997; de Boeck, 1994; Dirks, 1980; Dolot, 1985; Holmberg, 1969; Laughlin, 1978; Manderson, 1986; Richards, 2004; Russel, 2005; Salisbury, 1969; Scheper-Hughes, 1988; Scheper-Hughes, 2005; Turnbull, 1972; Winick, ed, 1979; Zheng, 1996) and the descriptions of such societies at times mimic, and at other times vary, from what was noted by individuals, like Levi, who found themselves fighting to stay alive. The degree to how such anthropologies differ from the accounts of the Holocaust is where the structure of the human condition must be examined.

Auschwitz was a society of hunger and habit and was highly structured and organized in order to destroy all those confined within (Rees, 2005). Bettelheim, as well as Primo Levi, formulated the idea that life within the concentration camps, although extreme, was an example of the human condition (Todorov, 1996). Such a claim is precisely why life within Auschwitz is important and why Levi (2005) was so distraught over the silence and lack of discussion of precisely what the Holocaust represents about humankind. Bettelheim (1960) called for an understanding of why so many, “like lemmings, marched themselves to their own death?” (Preface, *Auschwitz*, vii). What about the human condition allows for such incredible actions? What role did hunger play? Did morality, as Todorov (1996) contends, exist amidst the suffering? Why do some survive and others die under extreme conditions and what precisely was it about the culture of Auschwitz that mimics the human condition? More importantly, how did so few survive and so many march straight into the gas chambers without even a fraction of a fight for life?

## Methodology

So many diaries and memoirs exist that explain and outline precisely what happened during the Holocaust to Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, political prisoners and many others. Then why do education systems still rely on Anne Frank for students' insight into the Holocaust? While I understand the importance and the significance of Anne Frank's journal as a literary and historical piece, I believe that the reliance on Anne to retell the story of the Holocaust and of life under German occupation is because Anne saw the events unfolding through the romantic and innocent eyes of a child. As such, Anne is able to retell the events without the understanding of precisely what awaited her inside the confines of Auschwitz. The most horrifying and, arguably, the most important part of Anne's story was never told because Anne's diary remained inside the secret Annex while Anne was deported to an extermination camp. This study seeks to learn about life and survival inside Auschwitz and will focus on diaries and memoirs that describe only such events.

### Survivors of Auschwitz

This research into the human condition and the role of hunger, morality and humanity in Auschwitz is exploratory. Diaries and memoirs written by survivors of Auschwitz were read, analyzed and interpreted for the purpose of this study. Facts were not gathered for this study because facts, as stated by Todorov (1996), “are not transparent, and events never reveal their meaning all by themselves [and] if they are to teach us something, they must be interpreted” (30). The goal of the study was to use survivors’ accounts of life in Auschwitz in order to define various attributes of the human condition under various, and extreme, stresses.

The accounts of Auschwitz that I included in this study were: Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1961); Rudolf Vrba's *I Escaped Auschwitz* (2006); and Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1982).

Although I read many more accounts, and removed those that had come into question over time regarding their factual representativeness<sup>1</sup>, I chose these accounts in part because all three men came to Auschwitz in relatively similar ways and all three survived in vastly different means. On a more personal note, however, I chose these particular accounts because of irony. Rudolf Vrba risked his life and escaped from Auschwitz so that he might warn Zionist leaders about the Final Solution and prevent the deportation of Jews from Hungary in the spring of 1944 (Vrba, 2006). However, the Hungarian convoys were not stopped and arrived on the rail lines of Auschwitz with thousands of Jewish prisoners contained within—one of whom was Elie Wiesel.

### **Anthropologies of hunger societies**

Anthropologies of hunger societies were read and considered for the purpose of comparative analysis. As noted by Levi (1961), the part of Auschwitz life not concerned with immediate death was concerned with hunger. As such, I felt that an understanding of other hunger cultures and their responses to starvation would, through the comparative analysis they would allow, help dissect and analyze life in Auschwitz.

## **Findings**

### **Train ride**

All three men—Primo Levi, Rudolf Vrba, and Elie Wiesel—traveled to Auschwitz by train. Primo Levi was twenty-four years old when he was captured by the Fascist Militia in Italy on December 13, 1943. First sent to Fossoli, a vast detention camp, during the end of January 1944, Levi recalled hearing of his (and all other Jews) deportation from Italy on February 21, 1944. All Jews were to prepare for two weeks of travel; for each individual missing at roll-call, ten would be shot.

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<sup>1</sup> The accounts written by Olga Lengyel (1947) and Dr. Miklos Nyiszli (1960) were read but not interpreted for this study because questions have been raised (Provin, 2001) regarding the authenticity of their memoirs.

Levi speaks in his memoir as though all Jews understood the fate that awaited them prior to boarding the train. He speaks of mourning and of allowing children their last meal even though they were to die the following day. Whether or not the reality of death was actually known at the time remains questionable because both Vrba and Wiesel speak of a mass of individuals not knowing what was to come, and least of all knowing the horrors of Auschwitz. I question whether Levi prefers to place the knowledge of what was to occur into his memory in order to better accept the monotony and unwavering faith in humankind that led so many Jews to their death. As Vrba and Wiesel contend, most Jews believed that they were “resettling” in new lands and would work and remain in familial units once they had arrived at their destination.

Six hundred and fifty Jews boarded twelve rail cars for a two week train ride from Italy to Auschwitz. Levi's rail car held forty-five “pieces”<sup>2</sup> and the doors to the train were closed immediately after all, including Levi, had boarded, but the train did not move until dusk. Levi (1961) recalls the train traveling “slowly, with long, unnerving halts” (13). All on board wanted and needed water and all rarely succeeded in achieving such desires. The mass of people crushed together brought blows, kicks and curses for those still struggling to hold onto their own space within the confusion of contorted bodies. Levi's account of the journey is not as descriptive as that of Vrba's or Wiesel's, but Levi's account is the only one of the three that describes he and the woman seated next to him saying their farewells to one another. Levi recalls, “everyone said farewell to life through his neighbor [sic]” (14).

Rudolf Vrba, too, was captured after attempting to join a resistance movement<sup>3</sup> and after escaping from a Slovakian guarded labor camp, Vrba found himself aboard a train in early June 1942 heading to Maidanek, a concentration camp that Vrba called “a preparatory school for the

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<sup>2</sup> The Germans referred to those transported as “pieces” and Levi recalls this label used directly after the first roll-call he experienced prior to boarding the train.

<sup>3</sup> Primo Levi had actually achieved creating a resistance movement in the mountains of Italy when he was captured.

academy of Auschwitz” (2006, 55). Vrba recalls the journey in much the same light as Levi; however, Vrba traveled thinking only of escape, for he had done so before. Vrba recalls that at first little sympathy for one's fellow traveler existed between those on board. However, Vrba's account of the train ride differs from his two respective co-survivors in the level of respect for one another that eventually developed in his particular rail car.

The Tomasovs, a newly-wed couple, tricked by the Nazi promise that families would not be split apart, had just been married prior to the departure of the train and had yet to celebrate their wedding or have access to a bridal suite. After Vrba spread the word that newly-weds were aboard the train, smuggled food and drinks were brought out of hiding and provided to the couple in order to celebrate. Although space was extremely limited on the train, the passengers attempted to build a bridal suite for the newly-weds and eventually managed to erect a wall with the luggage that, unbeknownst to them, would soon serve them no good. Vrba (2006) recalls the action by claiming that the bliss of the Tomasavs “softened the shell which people had built around themselves for protection” (43). Conditions soon deteriorated in the train and the thirst that wreaked havoc of Levi's transport did so, as well, on Vrba's.

Elie Wiesel describes being transported to Auschwitz in May of 1944. Wiesel describes how Hungarian police forced all Jews inside the convoy of cattle wagons with eighty people to a car. Like the other transports of Jews, a few loaves of bread and an insufficient amount of water were provided to the Jews within the cattle cars. Wiesel describes, like Levi and Vrba, the lack of air and the lack of space available within the rail car. Although Vrba described the provision of a bridal suite within the rail car as a choice made by all encased within, Wiesel (1982) describes a different atmosphere where amidst the darkness, “young people gave way openly to instinct, taking advantage of the darkness to flirt..., without caring about anyone else, as though

they were alone in the world” (21). For Wiesel the journey was just as arduous and just as horrifying as it had been for the others. Conditions worsened as the train drew nearer to Auschwitz and Wiesel spent the last days of listening to the perceived madness of a woman screaming into the night about visions of flames stretching high into the sky.

### **Arrival at Auschwitz**

Levi and Wiesel entered Auschwitz in the exact same way. Such replication of arrival speaks to the Nazis’ efficiency and consistency—something that Vrba continuously notes in his memoir of Auschwitz. Vrba's trek to Auschwitz differed slightly from the others because his transport was two years earlier. Vrba describes arriving first in Maidanek, where he labored for approximately a month prior to his final transport to Auschwitz. Upon arrival at Maidanek, Vrba describes all men between sixteen and forty-five ordered out of the rail cars and describes the passengers on the train in disbelief over this decree for their leader, Monsignor Tiso, President of Slovakia, had promised over and over again that all families would remain together. As the train pulled away from Maidanek and headed toward Auschwitz, Vrba recalls thinking that perhaps life would be easier for those on the train because they would not be forced to work. Vrba was correct in the latter assumption because those who remained on the transport would be required to do no work. On June 30, 1942, Rudolf Vrba marched in wooden shoes into Auschwitz.

For Levi and Wiesel, the separation of families would occur on the platforms of Auschwitz. Both recall prisoners in “zebra stripes” approaching the rail cars and collecting luggage and materials left in the rail cars upon the orders of all Jews to get out. More importantly, both recall the initial selection of who was to die immediately in the gas chamber and who was fit enough to work, for the meantime, for the German war effort. Wiesel (1982)

recalls a prisoner approaching him and his father upon their arrival and asking them their respective ages. Wiesel responded, “I’m not quite fifteen yet,” to which the prisoner responded, “No. Eighteen.” Wiesel recalls that his father was counseled to respond that he was forty rather than his actual age of fifty. Although Wiesel protested, he writes that he eventually lamented and informed Josef Mengele<sup>4</sup> that he was fifteen and a farmer. Both Wiesel and his father moved to the left and were spared their lives in that moment.

Levi, Vrba and Wiesel recall with equally detailed descriptions the intake procedures of the camp where those chosen to live were herded into a small room to be shaved, showered, disinfected and re-clothed in the striped tunics of those on the rail platform and seen marching throughout the camp. Levi recalls that he too would undergo the metamorphosis from individual to prisoner. After each received their tattered, ill-fitting, and previously worn striped tunics, each received their permanent and visible scar of Auschwitz—their tattoo number. That number inked beneath their skin would replace each of their names as long as they were imprisoned in Auschwitz.

All throughout the accounts provided by Levi, Vrba and Wiesel of their arrival at Auschwitz is the descriptions of the never ending physical brutality of the Nazis. To err in the slightest meant death at Auschwitz and all three men were able to learn and adapt to this fact rather quickly. Such adaptations most certainly aided in their survival at Auschwitz.

### **First days in the concentration camp**

Quickly, like any individual who was to survive, Levi, Vrba and Wiesel learned about camp life. Vrba, in particular, recalls learning the valuable lesson of food. Vrba (2006) writes, “I ate [my bread] greedily, for I was learning my Auschwitz lessons slowly, but surely” (85). He

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<sup>4</sup> Josef Mengele was present at all selections and decided which prisoners were fit to live and which were fit to die. He was an SS officer and most likely not a doctor educated outside of the Third Reich.

continues, “Food meant strength, even if the bread contained sawdust, and the tea looked like sewer water” (68). Vrba understood immediately the value of food—food meant survival in Auschwitz.

Levi, Vrba and Wiesel describe in detail their first encounters with the Kapos within the camp and, more specifically, within their own Block. Kapos were the leaders of the Blocks (or barracks) where the prisoners slept and spent their time away from labor, roll-calls, marches, and other daily routines of camp life. Kapos, as described by Levi, Vrba and Wiesel were notoriously vicious and were rarely ever Jews. Instead, Kapos were usually German prisoners who had committed crimes prior to, and during, the war. Armed with clubs, whips and fists, Kapos displayed their authority in a way that would please the Nazis supervising the camps—with violence. Vrba recounts the fortune with which he was spared a particularly violent Kapo when his Block Senior sold him to another Kapo for the price of a lemon. It was during this transaction that Vrba also highlights his first introduction to the vast black-market of Auschwitz. A market that, as Vrba (2006) contends, “kept some alive and led others to torture and then to death” (86).

Like Vrba, Levi and Wiesel were also spared from harsh Kapos that killed without regard for consideration for human life. Wiesel recalls the first weeks at Auschwitz without particular detail as both he and his father were not forced to do any form of labor and spent the days sleeping in their Block. However, Wiesel recalls that they were soon moved to Buna, a labor camp where Vrba and Levi also spent their days. By this point in their respective journeys, all three men had passed, like hundreds of thousands of others, through the iron gates that bore the sign: *arbeit macht frei*. Work frees. For Levi, Vrba and Wiesel, this sign proved somewhat

accurate because the specific jobs that each managed to obtain while in Auschwitz eventually led to their survival and freedom.

### **Differences in camp life**

It appears that the only similarities experienced at Auschwitz by Levi, Vrba and Wiesel were—aside from luck—the train ride, the arrival and initiation into Auschwitz, and the fate of being drafted into Blocks with relatively non-violent Kapos. Apart from that, each of the three survivors led vastly different lives within the confines of Auschwitz and held vastly different posts in the hierarchy of prisoners. Yet all three managed to survive and escape death by blows, the pistol of an SS officer, the gallows, starvation, illness and the gas chamber.

Elie Wiesel was the youngest and had the fewest technical skills of the three. However, early on Wiesel received advice from a fellow prisoner that he should volunteer for a labour detail in Buna and, in doing so, he and his father managed to find themselves working in the electrical warehouse of Buna. Such a warehouse afforded protection, compared to those working outside, from the ailments of the weather and provided enough nourishment to sustain a body in the standards necessary for survival in Auschwitz. Although both Wiesel and his father received beatings from their Kapo who, though relatively subdued compared to other Kapos within the camp, was sometimes partial to fits of rage, both managed to avoid significant injury. Wiesel did, however, end up in the camp hospital due to a swelling in his right foot. He encountered a Jewish doctor who performed a surgery that allowed for his right foot to drain and Wiesel was informed that he would only require two weeks to recover. Two days after his surgery the Nazis were abandoning Auschwitz because of the approaching Russian army. Wiesel and his father opted to march with those deemed capable.

Primo Levi's work detail was at times arguably the most physical, but his abilities as a chemist allowed him to move into a more comfortable work atmosphere as his time within the camp expired. Although not spared, as previously mentioned, from the harshest of physical labors at Auschwitz, eventually Levi was selected to work in a warehouse of Buna and finally ended up in the Laboratory. Levi (1961) recalls hearing of his selection into the Laboratory, "for a moment my ears ring and the Buna whirls around me" (125). He continues, "there are three Levis in Kommando 98, but *Hundert Vierundsiebzig Fünf Hundert Siebzehn* (174517) is me, there is no possible doubt [that] I am one of the chosen" (125). Levi continued his work in the Laboratory until he was struck with scarlet fever and transferred to the Ka-Be (or hospital). Such illness afforded, as Levi recalls, "forty days isolation and therefore of rest" (137). However, Levi was not so weak, as he himself noted, that he would not be able to survive either the fever or the selections<sup>5</sup> that occurred daily in the hospital. Levi was still in the hospital when the Nazis marched with the remaining prisoners and quickly abandoned Auschwitz because of the fast approaching Russian front.

Rudolf Vrba held, of the three men, the highest position in the camp and was the only one (of the three) who joined the organized "underground"<sup>6</sup> movement of Auschwitz. Vrba, unlike

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<sup>5</sup> Hospital selections were more frequent than those occurring in regular camp life and those deemed unfit or incapable of healing were selected to receive an injection of phenol into the heart (Levi, 1961; Vrba, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The underground movement of Auschwitz was comprised of specific, mainly Jewish, individuals who had established themselves in the camp and who had developed important relationships with Kapos and, sometimes, the SS Officers themselves. Those involved in the movement were placed in specific Blocks and Kommandos that afforded them luxuries of food and relative safety within the camp. The specific goal of the underground movement was escape. The individuals within the movement who wished to attempt to escape had to have their plans approved by the leaders of the underground because the reason for the ultimate goal of escape was to inform the Zionist leaders of Europe as to the conditions and purpose of Auschwitz—that of the extermination of all European Jews. Those who risked their lives to escape and were caught were hung in the gallows for all to see and were examples of what to do and not to do during the next escape attempt. Perhaps even more unfortunate was the reality, unknown to the underground movement, that the leaders of the Zionist movement already had some understanding of what was to occur for the hundreds of thousands of Jews still to be deported to Auschwitz and the other concentration camps of Eastern Europe. Although the Zionist leaders may not have understood the full extent to which the Nazis were exterminating the Jews when the Holocaust first began, they had been informed as to precisely what was occurring

Levi or Wiesel, often found himself working where it was easy to obtain illegal food. Initially, Vrba found himself working with the kind-hearted Kapo, Franz, who hated the Germans almost as much as any Jew, and Vrba was able to steal food daily in order to trade and consume for his own benefit. His friendship with Josef, a man whose girlfriend he knew from his home town, also afforded Vrba many benefits. Josef knew many of the Kapos and one particular relationship saved both Vrba and Josef from the gas chambers. After a particularly difficult work detail, Vrba and Josef, along with the rest of the camp, were faced with an untimely selection. Both Vrba and Josef had been without food for twenty-four hours and on their feet for eight. When it was each of their turns to run in front of Jakob Fries,<sup>7</sup> each stumbled and was sent to the line of men headed for the gas chamber. A lucky reprieve from one of Josef's Kapo friends landed the two men back into the preferred line of survivors.

Vrba also worked in the "Canada" Kommando, which received such a name by the SS Officers because of the various fruits and luxuries available within. Essentially, Canada was where all of the luggage and belongings of the prisoners ended up upon the rail cars' arrival at Auschwitz. Skilled prisoners working in Canada were often able to steal, without detection, food which could be consumed, on the spot, or hidden in order to be traded on the highly lucrative black-market that bought friends, and sometimes freedom, at Auschwitz. Vrba learned the black-market well and became adept at stealing food and other luxuries from Canada. The work detail in Canada also granted, albeit with vicious irony, Vrba's connection to the underground movement.

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at Auschwitz when the Nazis began the deportation of Hungarian Jews. Rudolf Vrba had risked his life to inform the Zionist leaders who had, in turn, traded the lives of millions for their own (Vrba, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> For Vrba and probably many others, Jakob Fries was the face of Auschwitz because he stood daily at the iron gate and watched prisoners, Kapos and the like march to their specific labors for the day. Fries was particularly unrelenting and wielded his club at will often killing prisoners who failed to march in perfect five-by-five formation (Vrba, 2006).

After a friendship with a Kapo had led to Vrba's smuggling of gifts for a love affair among Kapos, Vrba was eventually caught and received a vicious beating of forty-seven lashes. Vrba's refusal to admit who provided him with the goods and who they were meant for earned him respect and put him in good favour with the Kapo whose life he had saved by refusing to divulge the secret. The Kapo, Bruno, was friends with the man who held the post of leader of the underground movement. Although Vrba's wounds were severe enough for him to be selected for the phenol injection, a doctor with whom Bruno was in good graces provided protection for Vrba and he avoided selection. Finally, Bruno's connection with the Registrar, who controlled which Block prisoners were sent, permitted Vrba to return to Canada Block where he could recuperate from his wounds. The Registrar, Ersnt Burger, turned out to be the leader of the underground movement and eventually Ersnt assisted Vrba in reaching the role of Registrar when Vrba was transferred to Birkenau—Auschwitz's sister camp. Vrba's position in the camp as Registrar played an extremely significant role in his ability to escape from Auschwitz.

## **Hunger**

Primo Levi's account of his time at Auschwitz is the most descriptive of the levels of hunger experienced. Few pages go by without a detailed description of how the body experiences hunger and Levi often refers to hunger as a "comrade" (94), a constant companion. Levi (1961) states, "hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal" (112). He continues to describe hunger as a free word, "created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes" (112-113). Levi describes the suffering of each and every day in Auschwitz as composed of hunger and violence. He speaks of the irritation of all when a starving body in the Block began to recount recipes of favourite meals and how minutes after one voice would die down after recounting a memorable meal, another one would begin. It was as though only

talking about a meal could allow an individual to recollect and experience taste. Levi also writes of men reduced by hunger to acts of violence and who would kill and maim for a piece of bread in order to survive.

While Levi's recollection of hunger pangs resonated throughout his entire account of life in Auschwitz, Wiesel does not speak of hunger until the latter pages of his memoir. However, eventually Wiesel (1982) succumbs to hunger and recalls that, "I now took little interest in anything except my daily plate of soup and my crust of stale bread—they were my whole life" (50). Wiesel speaks of feeling like no more than a starved stomach, a stomach that was intensely aware of the passage of time. Wiesel, like Levi, recounts precisely how damaging hunger was to the soul of a man. When the remaining capable prisoners were forced to march from Auschwitz in order to retreat further into Nazi territory and farther away from the approaching Russian Front, Wiesel tells a story of a young boy who, blinded by hunger, attacked and killed his father in a vicious attempt to consume his father's bread. The boy does not travel far before he falls prey to another group who realized what the boy had managed to wrestle away from his father. A piece of stale bread that could, only for a few sparse moments, relieve hunger led to the deaths of a father and a son.

Hunger for Vrba remained an entirely different entity. Although Vrba experienced little intimacy with hunger while at Auschwitz, he did understand what food represented inside the concentration camp. Vrba's position in the camp afforded him the ability to engage in the black-market, where paper money meant nothing and one single lemon could represent a life. Hunger kept Vrba alive because he had access to a variety of food and goods and was able to provide, for a price, such goods to those who were starving. Ultimately, that price for Vrba was freedom. However, it was only when on the run and outside the vast complex of Auschwitz that Vrba

experienced hunger and starvation because outside of Auschwitz Vrba no longer had access to the daily rations of food provided by prisoners arriving at the camp.

### **Faith, luck and morality in the camp**

What resonates throughout Levi's, Vrba's and Wiesel's accounts of Auschwitz is the experience of chance or luck that aided in their freedom. Had there been one slight difference or alteration in their experience at Auschwitz, each of these men could have died in the gas chambers like the millions of others that met that unfortunate fate. However, not just luck alone created survivors out of Levi, Vrba and Wiesel. Each of these men quickly learned how to function within the confines of Auschwitz and each learned how to develop relationships and behaviours that would aid in their chances for survival.

Although faith in God to protect and belief in His will led many Jews straight into the gas chambers, those who managed to avoid such selection and marched into life at Auschwitz quickly abandoned any such faith. While some did hold on to their faith a little while longer than others, the actions of the Nazis left little wondering whether or not God was watching what was occurring at Auschwitz. Wiesel (1982) recounts a time when the gallows were brought out for the public hangings of three individuals charged with having knowledge of an attempt to blow up a small portion of Buna. One of the individuals was a child, a "sad-eyed angel" as Wiesel referred to him (61). When the chairs tipped over, the adults died quickly because the weight of each of their bodies was enough to induce strangulation. As Wiesel and the other men of the camp marched passed the hanging bodies<sup>8</sup> they all saw that the third rope, that holding the child, was still moving. The child was still alive because the weight of his body was not enough to allow him to pass quickly. Wiesel (1982) recalls, "For more than half an hour [the child]

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<sup>8</sup> All prisoners were required to walk past those who had been hanged in the gallows so that each might learn of what would happen to them if they broke the rules of the camp (Levi, 1961; Vrba, 2002, Wiesel, 1960).

stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes” (62). Wiesel recalls a man behind him asking where God was, to which Wiesel replied, “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on the gallows...” (62). For many, God died at Auschwitz.

Vrba (2006) also recounts an experience where a man, Moses, who, upon entering Auschwitz, consistently repeated “it is the will of God” (171) when faced with the reality of death as it was occurring in the camp. However, on a trip to Birkenau where Moses and Vrba, along with other workers, witnessed a specifically horrific funeral procession of women to the gas chambers—women who knew precisely what awaited them and wailed and panicked and began throwing themselves out of the lorry—Moses finally proclaimed that there was no God. There could not be. Not at Auschwitz and if He did exist, He did not appear to care what happened to His Jewish followers during the Holocaust.

Levi, as mentioned earlier, was tortured with the inhumanity of humankind during his time at Auschwitz. Morality, for Levi, was virtually non-existent. However, Levi's own account displays, at times, individuals of high moral standing who would not allow the Nazis to destroy their character. Levi's relationship, as told by Levi himself, with Lorenzo, a civilian who worked at Buna displays how not all of humankind fell to the moral depravity known during the Holocaust. Although it could be argued that Lorenzo was not a prisoner and, as such, did not know or live life inside Auschwitz, Levi's own account of his disgust for Kuhn, a man in his Block who is openly thanking God for saving him from the selection while the man in the bunk beside him has been condemned to death, depicts Levi's own sense of humanity and moral spirit. If Levi was devoid of all human feelings and moral senses he might not have felt such compassion for the condemned man as he had.

## **Survival and freedom from Auschwitz**

While Elie Wiesel chose to march from the hospital with the German soldiers who were retreating from the approaching Russian army because of faith in Hitler -- the one man who stood true to his word to annihilate all Jews as part of the Final Solution -- Primo Levi opted to remain in the hospital and was liberated on January 27, 1945—ten days after the Nazis abandoned Auschwitz. Wiesel was eventually liberated from Buchenwald concentration camp on April 10, 1947 but the decision that he and his father made—to march—led to two and a half more months of imprisonment and, more importantly, the death of Elie Wiesel's father upon reaching Buchenwald in late January 1945.

Rudolf Vrba survived nearly two years in concentration camps in Germany. His path to freedom was an escape plan that was successful because of the help of the underground movement of Auschwitz, the assistance of a few civilians, some occurrences of good luck and Vrba's own never-ending faith in his ability to be free. Vrba and his fellow escapee traveled from Auschwitz to the Slovakian border on foot in the spring of 1944 and were successful in warning the Zionist leaders in Slovakia about the truth of Auschwitz. However, Vrba's April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944 escape from Auschwitz was not successful in the greater goal of both Vrba and the underground movement—to prevent the transport of Hungarian Jews, including Elie Wiesel, to Auschwitz.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The descriptions of Auschwitz provided by Primo Levi, Rudolf Vrba and Elie Wiesel provide insight into the capabilities of humankind. The answer to Bettelheim's question regarding how so many millions of people marched directly into the gas chambers can be found in the memoirs of Levi, Vrba and Wiesel. Why did so many behave like lemmings and

acquiesce to the Nazis? They did so because they had faith in their God, faith in their leaders, faith in their community and faith in humankind. Humans are conditioned to have faith in authority and to abide by all instructions because such is the human condition. Those who were blinded by faith marched not into the gas chambers, but into the showers of what they perceived to be a labour camp. Those who experienced an Auschwitz beyond the rail platform and the crematorium were not rational human beings functioning in a rational society. Rather, they were starved bodies attempting not to live, but simply to live another day (Levi, 1961).

At the basic level, hunger is primitive and, in its final stages, it is about death (Russell, 2005). Hunger played a substantial role in the lives of the prisoners of Auschwitz. Hunger dominated the entire body of the imprisoned individuals because “nourishment as a biological process is more important than sex” (Richards, 2004, 1). Bettelheim’s question is posed as though it is being asked of free men. Free men, as Levi contends, do not know hunger like that of a man possessed by a starved stomach. As such, the prisoners at Auschwitz were not free in either a political, social, economic or individual realm. The Nazis controlled every aspect of their daily lives and hunger controlled all else.

Morality in the sense of free men may not have existed at Auschwitz, but a moral code was developed inside the confines of the concentration camp. Levi, Vrba and Wiesel all recount stories where men were killed for stealing bread from those who were weaker. Such was the moral code at Auschwitz—feed oneself at all costs but risk your life if you steal bread directly from a man’s hand. Stealing from those who were dead or making the final march to the gas chambers was acceptable, but stealing from a man before he had been condemned to death by the Nazis was not (Levi, 1961; Vrba, 2006; Wiesel, 1982). Although it is questionable as to how definitive the moral dimension was for the Kapos and SS Offices of Auschwitz, considering they

abused and killed at will, the moral capacity of the Jewish prisoners of Auschwitz is well defined. It would appear that, rather than the Jewish prisoners, it was the individuals representing the closest concept of a free man within Auschwitz (the SS Officers and the Kapo) who had, in fact, the lowest moral dimension.

Survival at Auschwitz was rare and the fact that so few managed such a feat is a testament to the efficiency with which the Nazis carried out their Final Solution. Auschwitz is also a testament to the human condition because it exemplifies the depths and zeniths of humankind. The Nazis created a machine of labour and death and used those they deemed unfit for society to further their war effort and in doing so, “demonstrated with Teutonic thoroughness the depths to which man can sink” (Vrba 2006, 287). Yet Rudolf Vrba, Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel demonstrated with fantastic thoroughness the heights to which humankind can rise. They demonstrate with immeasurable humility that no matter how hungry, how desolate or how broken, individuals are still capable of displaying grand civility in a time of brutish realities.

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