

Oxford  
University  
Press



200 Madison Avenue,  
New York, N.Y. 10016

**ADVANCE PROOF** · Please note that this is **UNCORRECTED**

**Title** THE SURVIVOR: An Anatomy of Life in the Death  
Camps

**Author** Terrence Des Pres

**Probable publication date** February/March 1976

**Probable price** \$ 10.95

**Illustrations** none

**Approximate length** 290 pp.

A brief description of the book is enclosed

# THE SURVIVOR

By Terrence Des Pres

A profound and powerfully moving study of human survival. Survival of what? Terrence Des Pres looks at how men and women survived the worst hells that people have inflicted on each other, the concentration camps of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. From that depth of horror, Des Pres manages with the quoted evidence of countless documents and with eloquent argument to retrieve a message of hope for the future. But this is no facile optimism: only when we, like the inmates of those camps, have seen the worst and have realized on what necessary qualities basic humanity depends, can we expect to have even a chance of survival in extremity.

The inmates saw death all around them, and the near certainty of their own death. They saw that they needed some very basic things in order to survive: food, luck, clothing, and time. And in addition they needed some basic social attributes, a sense of self and dignity which somehow they could retain (it might mean merely an attempt to clean themselves), a sense of resistance (which might be carried on even while seeming to cooperate with their captors), a sense of giving to each other, and a determination to bear witness to what they had seen. If they saw these needs clearly, they had at least a greater chance of survival than others.

Men and women did find these needs and qualities in themselves in the camps; and Des Pres' portrait of the survivor is radically different from those painted by such writers as Bettelheim, Elkins, Wiesel, and Lifton. It amounts also to a critique of philosophies that are based on the belief that humans are basically bad; and of societies which exalt heroes and think of survivors as 'mere' survivors. Des Pres disputes behaviorist and psychoanalytical interpretations of the character of the survivor, and settles in a controversial last chapter on a biological one: at the most basic level, life will perpetuate itself. But his message is deeply moral.

Terrence Des Pres is <sup>Assistant</sup> ~~Associate~~ Professor of English at Colgate University.

THESE ARE UNCORRECTED ADVANCE PROOFS BOUND  
FOR YOUR REVIEWING CONVENIENCE.

**THE SURVIVOR**

**An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps**

**Terrence Des Pres**

**New York**

**Oxford University Press**

**1976**

Arendt

D

810

.J4

D474

1976

Copyright © 1976 by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number:

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

STEVENSON LIBRARY BARD COLLEGE  
Annandale-on-Hudson N.Y. 12504



THE SURVIVOR IN FICTION

## CONTENTS

I	The Survivor in Fiction
II	The Will to Bear Witness
III	Excremental Assault
IV	Nightmare and Waking
V	Life in Death
VI	Us and Them
VII	Radical Nakedness
	Bibliography

EACH THING, said Spinoza in the "Ethics," *insofar as it is in itself, endeavors to persevere in its being*. That may not be true for rocks and stars, but for societies and men it is undeniable. Survival of the body and its well-being take priority over everything else, although this imperative is transcended and lost sight of when the machinery of civilization is working as it should. The remarkable fact, however, is that while the business of living goes forward from day to day we reserve our reverence and highest praise for action which culminates in death. I am referring to images of the hero in Western religion and literature, and here

6 One more distinction: because the traditional hero chooses to find consummation in death, he controls the condition for his fulfillment. The survivor's choice is not absolute in the same way. To stay alive is of course the whole point, but unlike those who die deliberately, the survivor can never be sure of success. Any day sickness or the whim of a vicious guard can cut short the struggle. That is one more circumstance the survivor must face. If he or she should die, it is the fight to live and not the manner of dying which matters. And finally there is this: in extremity, the bare possibility of survival is not enough. There must also be a move beyond despair and self-pity to that fierce determination which survivors call up in themselves. To come through; to keep a living soul in a living body. ■

The first condition of extremity is that there is no escape, no place to go except the grave. It is like a city under siege, Paris in 1870, Leningrad of the 900 days, or like the town of Oran in *The Plague*: "But once the town gates were shut, every one of us realized that all . . . were . . . in the same boat, and each would have to adapt himself to the new condition<sup>5</sup> of life" (61). So begins Camus' allegory of the extreme situation. New conditions become "normal conditions—in other words, the plague" (166); and this, in its immense power, is like "the slow, deliberate progress of some monstrous thing crushing out all upon its path" (163). The city becomes a "victim world," and the old order is transformed. Schools turn into hospitals, the stadium becomes a quarantine camp, streetcars are used as death wagons. This is a world in which living and dying are no longer held separate; in which the forms of life are determined by death.

The plague is ubiquitous and no place is safe. Death waits at home, in the street, on the stage; and slowly the condition of anti-life, because it cannot be veiled in myth or held in the balance of combat, becomes anti-human as well. Subject to this pressure and unable to draw inspiration from traditional forms of courage-in-adversity, the people of the town suffer general col-

lapse. They despair, become selfish and mean; they will not face facts and behave as if asleep. Confronted with a terror that has no foretellable end, they are reduced to helplessness. If they had been attacked by something on the human scale, an invasion of hostile neighbors for example, the citizens of Oran would have rallied to the cause and given their lives as the martyr and the patriot have always done. But the extreme situation is not an event, not a period of crisis with its proper beginning, middle and end. It is a state of existence which persists beyond the ability of men to alter or end it. And because there is no opportunity for one all-out effort, no single battle to be fought come what may, the honored forms of heroism fail as models for action and spiritual support. A sense of impotence prevails and dehumanization sets in. Against *this* enemy the people of the town see no way left to act. 7

Extremity requires an attitude which allows men and women to act, and thereby to keep faith in themselves as something more than victims. First of all, then, the survivor is not a victim merely. He refuses to see his victimization as total, fights it as best he can, and will not consent to death in any form. He will not, that is, accept the logic of the situation imposed upon him. So there are two kinds of people in *The Plague*, the "townspeople" and the "volunteers." Both react to the plague, the former on its terms, the latter on terms partially their own. The "townspeople" remain subject to necessity, at one with the situation destroying them. The "volunteers" respond to the same necessity, but by opposing it. They turn reaction into action self-directed, and in this way move far enough beyond death's rule to keep themselves intact as human beings. Rieux, Tarrou and their co-workers pit themselves against the plague, with no conviction of success, but only determined not to stand idle while others suffer. Together, therefore, they organize hygienic programs, they tend the stricken, they dispose of the dead. They work twenty hours a day amid the stench and agony of the dying, spending themselves in that endless, empty time of day upon day, without the encouragement of visible progress, without the hope of a positive end in sight, and



terms with it, transcended his victimization by refusing self-pity or the temptation to hope for anything but life itself, and then gone on to find what goodness he can in the life he has. Like all survivors, he has squarely faced the basic problems of existence in extremity. The first is how not to despair. The second, how to keep <sup>moral sense</sup> ~~integrity~~ and dignity intact. ■ 15

Like thousands of actual P.O.W.'s, Shukhov was sent to the camps because during the war he had been captured by the Germans. According to his interrogator, "he'd surrendered to the Germans with the intention of betraying his country" (71). Millions of men and women under Soviet rule were imprisoned for similar—and similarly insane—reasons. In *The First Circle*, Gerasimovich becomes a *zek* for "intent to commit treason," Kagan for "failure to inform." These strictly imaginary crimes were defined and made real by Section 58 of the penal code. Anyone who stood out, either by accident or decision, sooner or later could expect to be arrested—anyone incompatible with the system in which he or she was trapped. The Soviet camps were full of people arrested *because* they were innocent, because they would not cooperate with evil, because they possessed the integrity to think and judge for themselves. In *Cancer Ward* Kostoglotoy and his fellow students get seven years plus exile: "We used to come together, court the girls, dance; but the boys also talked about politics. And about HIM. . . . In May, just before the examinations, we were arrested, the girls too" (193).

When a government rules by force and falsehood, when people are murdered in great numbers and the prisons are jammed with men and women who even the interrogators know are innocent, then to escape involvement becomes impossible. Some work with the system, become murderers. Others—millions—become victims. Still others watch and pretend they do not see. Many men and women were swept into the Soviet camps by pure accident. They happened to be in the wrong place at the right time, they became part of a quota. But there was always an out-



its ruthlessness anything known of the lives of cannibals and rats" (208). But at the same time he speaks of "the harsh apprenticeship of ~~the~~ camp" (388). To what can that refer, if not to the apprenticeship of one's own soul, to the crystallization ~~of that essence all~~ ~~immense~~ of that essence all men and women share but seldom realize or even acknowledge? As Nerzhin puts it, "one must try to temper, to cut, to polish one's soul so as to become a *human being*" (389). That recalls Shukhov: "the longer he spent at the camp the stronger he made himself." It seems clear that the ordeal of survival becomes, at least for some, an experience of growth and purification.

By virtue of the extraordinary demands made upon men and women in extremity, their struggle to live humanly involves a process of becoming more—essentially, ~~more~~ <sup>simply</sup>—human. Not the humanness of refinement and proliferation, of course, but of the fundamental knowledge of good and evil, and of the will to stand by this knowledge, on which all else depends. Nerzhin says: "I had no idea what good and evil were, and whatever was allowed seemed fine to me. But the lower I sink into this inhumanly cruel world, the more I respond to those who, even in such a world, speak to my conscience" (515). For this kind of survivor, the way down is the way up.

Like other types of the hero, survivors take their stand directly on the line, but they are unique in that they *stay* there. And it is there, in the balance of being and non-being, that their peculiar freedom becomes real and effective. Their vision is not clouded by ~~the~~ sheltering illusions; they do not suddenly, in the ambush of crisis, discover their mortality, for in order to remain alive they must at every moment acknowledge the centrality of death. This familiarity has not failed to breed a proper contempt: survivors may be killed, but as long as they live they will not be afraid. And closer to death, survivors are rooted more urgently in life than most of us. Their will to survive is one with the thrust of life itself, a strength beyond hope, as stubborn as the upsurge of spring. In this state a strange exultation fills the soul, a sense of being equal to the worst. And as long as they live, survivors *are*

20 equal to the worst. This, finally, is the attitude of those *zeks*—Nerzhin, Gerasimovich and their friends—who at the end of *The First Circle* are shoved into a meat truck and shipped off to the camps:

Concentrating on the turns the van was making, the zeks fell silent.

Yes, the taiga and the tundra awaited them, the record cold of Oymyakon and the copper excavations of Dzhezkazgan; pick and barrow; starvation rations of soggy bread; the hospital; death. The very worst.

But there was peace in their hearts.

# They were filled with the fearlessness of those who have lost *everything*, the fearlessness which is not easy to come by but which endures (579). ■

Having fought against the Nazi invasion, Solzhenitsyn's survivors are also soldiers, and that is how they think of themselves as day by day they withstand extremity with the modest tactics which keep them alive. "A soldier gets along best on the defensive" (89), says Kostoglotov in *The Cancer Ward*; and in fact the survivor's struggle is very much like guerrilla warfare—"tactical offensives within the strategic defense," as Mao Tse-tung defined it (157). But the survivor's enemy is death, and in the end he is a soldier who can never hope for more than small and temporary victories. The cancer ward is death's home field, and those who find themselves there have no thought but to survive, to employ any medical tactic which may strengthen their defense. They fight as best they can, but since death will not retreat, they must come to terms with their situation so as to live beyond fear and despair: "In the face of death, in the face of the striped panther of death who had already lain down beside him, in the same bed, Vadim, as a man of intellect, had to find a formula for living" (293). Kostoglotov's answer is to live as the soldier lives: aware of danger and ready to die, yet putting up the longest fight possible, and regarding all men kindly but without pity as brothers in a losing war.

This hardness of the living heart is something a man like Kos-



which will deprive him of his virility, and this is the decision he must face: "To become a walking husk of a man— isn't that an exorbitant price? It would be a mockery. Should I pay it?" (346). And if he pays, what then?

Whom shall I seek, with whom share  
The heavy-hearted joy of my survival?

In this small verse the whole of his fate is expressed. We can suppose that this lusty man would once have led a simple fruitful life, shared with the woman he has come to love. But now he must continue to live against encroaching cancer with the knowledge that he has lost everything; that love and work, children, life ripening within, will not be his to try. But he does choose to *love*, once more giving up a part of himself in order to preserve what he calls "the main thing." He will not stop now, because after the camps he cannot, in this last extremity, negate the only meaning his life has had; and because to continue to live, even for a few months, is worth it absolutely.

Survivors *choose* life, and the basis of their choice is apparent in the happiness of Kostoglotov's final walk through the city—his rapport with the teeming life and motion around him, the intense relish with which he eats some roasted meat, the tender gratitude he feels toward Vega for her love. It is a wonderful day, and the wisdom of his deep delight is evident: "Even if next spring never came, even if this was the last, it was one *extra* spring! And thanks be for that!" (571). Like Shukhov and like Nerzhin, he is able to respond to life's least gift with a fullness of joy which is, finally, greater and more powerful than hope. That is the survivor's small but invaluable return. In this state of mind Kostoglotov leaves the cancer ward in search of a flowering apricot tree. Not to possess it, but only for a moment's time to behold it, and allow the beauty of its delicate blossoming to confirm the enduring *Yes* he has so often and at such cost said to life.

Then back into exile. He boards the train, finds a place in the baggage rack, and settles for the journey thinking: "Others had not survived. He had survived" (615). That is all. Kostoglotov

is a man without hope, but even so, he has lived as long as he could, without damage to his innocence, without harm to others. And in this effort—to carry on when ordinary avenues of life are closed and death lies visible ahead—the survivor reaches his limit. In the end he has nothing, nothing at all but this short *reprise*, this extra life free and his own. The loss of particular hope opens on the power of life in itself, something unexpectedly uncovered when the spirit is driven down to its roots and through its pain is brought to a stillness and finality which—as men once said—surpasses understanding. For survivors that is enough. ■



TO COME from fiction to documents is to move from an ideal lucidity to the dense anguish of men and women telling as straightforwardly as they know how the story of what they saw and endured in their passage through the concentration camps. Their testimony is given in memory, told in pain and often clumsily, with little thought for style or rhetorical device. The experience they describe, furthermore, resists the tendency to fictionalize which informs most remembering. We have accepted the idea that when the past is described the narrator selects and arranges, points up and slides over, maneuvering the facts to produce an acceptable image. And no doubt that is true for men and women in civilized circumstances, where there is always more than one level of meaning to choose from, more than one way to view the facts. But the world survivors speak of has been so rigidly shaped by necessity, and so completely shared—almost all survivors say “we” rather than “I”—that from one report to the next the degree of consistency is unusually high. The facts ~~would seem to~~ lie embedded in a fixed configuration; fixed, we may come to believe, by the nature of existence when life is circumscribed by death.

Men and women are happy in many different ways, but in sorrow's deepest moments all are one. The experience of extremity issues always in the same need and pain, always in what Barrington Moore, Jr., has called “the unity of misery” (11). We may prefer to ignore the world's anguish, and those who must bear it have seldom been articulate. But radical suffering, as Moore observes, “has been the lot of a very large portion of humanity for nearly all of recorded history. The inarticulateness of the vic-

Death is compounded by oblivion, and the foundation of humanness—faith in human continuity—is endangered. The final horror is that no one will be left. A survivor of Dachau told me this: 33

The SS guards took pleasure in telling us that we had no chance of coming out alive, a point they emphasized with particular relish by insisting that after the war the rest of the world would not believe what happened; there would be rumors, speculations, but no clear evidence, and people would conclude that evil on such a scale was just not possible.

Without the past we have nothing to stand on, no context from which to organize the energies of moral vision. Against such possibilities survivors do what they can. Facing man-made horror, their need becomes strong to remember and record—to ensure, through their own survival or the survival of their word, that out of horror's very midst (from where else can it come?) the truth shall emerge. ■

"There was," says Elie Wiesel in *One Generation After*, "a veritable passion to testify for the future, against death and oblivion, a passion conveyed by every possible means of expression"; he goes on to cite "accounts told with childlike artlessness" and "precisely kept ledgers of horrors," all of which "waver between scream and silent anger" (53). In *Night*, his first book, Wiesel describes the agony of his boyhood in Auschwitz, and it is that experience which becomes central to the spiritual position of the protagonists in later books, novels like *The Accident* and *The Gates of the Forest*, in which Wiesel attempts to interpret, not the experience itself, but the survivor's relation to it in retrospect. ~~Before all else, Wiesel's novels are~~ concerned with the problems of the survivor as a witness. In *One Generation After* he says: "All questions pertaining to Auschwitz lead to anguish. Whether or not the death of one million children has meaning, either way man is negated and condemned" (56). But if faith in

argues<sup>5</sup> that guilt is the key to the survivor's mentality. The survivor has a "need to justify his own survival in the face of others' deaths" (35). This need arises from a "process of identification which creates guilt over what one has done to, or not done for, the dying while oneself surviving" (496). Lifton reduces the problem to the "inseparability of death and guilt" (499), and as might be expected, he focuses on "the survivor's tendency to incorporate within himself an image of the dead, and then to think, feel and act as he imagines they did or would" (496). I have tried to suggest some of the ways in which this "tendency to incorporate" comes about. In Lifton's view, however, the fact that living men and women insist upon remembering the dead is clear proof of neurosis. The aim of psychiatric treatment is adjustment, acceptance, forgetting—goals which constitute a condition the survivor rejects. The urgency of his need to bear witness puts him in open conflict with the system being imposed to explain away his behavior, and such opposition, from the psychiatric point of view, is further evidence of neurotic reaction.

Lifton's good will is evident, but as a psychiatrist he can only assume that behavior as intense and singleminded as the survivor's is abnormal. Lifton's original focus on atomic-bomb survivors, furthermore, obscures an essential aspect of bearing witness which becomes clear in instances of protracted crisis. The will to bear witness arises early, not after guilt has had time to accrue, but during the *initial* stage of adjustment to extremity. This is an important point, and it is confirmed repeatedly in the descriptions survivors give of their experience. The following passage is from a survivor's letter to me, and plainly, the idea of a "task" precedes any notion of guilt:

I feel no guilt in being a survivor, but I feel that I have a task to fulfill. We may call it the survivor task, and it is part of my ego ideal, not of my superego. This task crowded into my thinking when I participated for the first time at the roll call of the captives in the concentration camp Buchenwald thirty-four years ago when I had no guarantee whatsoever that I would be a survivor.



38 Another survivor, Leon Thorne, began *Out of the Ashes* in hiding, before he was captured and sent to the camps: "I dare not hope that I shall live through this period, but I must work as though my words *will* come through. I shall act and write as though there were hope for me" (13).

The survivor's behavior looks different when seen in terms of a "task," and Lifton too has noticed this. In *History and Human Survival* he refers to "the survivor's intense concern with historical record" (197); and although the "sense of special mission characteristic of survivors" is still explained by "the need to render significant the deaths they have seen" (204), Lifton's emphasis is now on a positive outcome. He wishes to retain the concept of guilt, but—as in the following remarks from an article in *Partisan Review*—finally he wants to suggest a new way of thinking about it: "although as a psychiatrist I was brought up to look upon guilt as a profound problem within neurosis, as indeed it can be, one comes in certain situations to value it as a process" (518). This, in turn, leads to the formulation of an "energizing or animating guilt" (517), and ultimately to a redefinition of survival guilt as "the anxiety of responsibility" (519). At which point—and this is the conclusion I draw from Lifton's work—the idea of guilt transcends itself. As the capacity for response to deeds and events; as care for the future; as awareness of the interdependency of human life, it becomes simply conscience. Ernest A. Rappaport<sup>has</sup> reached a similar conclusion. Drawing on personal experience (he was in Buchenwald) and on years of psychiatric work with survivors of the Nazi camps, Rappaport argued that their experience was so radically unique that the theory of neurosis is inadequate to deal with it; and finally that much of their psychological difficulty is an outcome of the social resistance they encounter when they do not go along with "the preferred attitude of forgetting."

→ Which is to say that apart from the idea of "survival guilt," there is still the problem of its usage, of its deployment as a defense. The "world" to which survivors speak is very much a part of their condition as witnesses. They speak *for* someone, but also

IT BEGAN in the trains, in the locked boxcars—eighty to a hundred people per car—crossing Europe to the camps in Poland:

The temperature started to rise, as the freight car was enclosed and body heat had no outlet. . . . The only place to urinate was through a slot in the skylight, though whoever tried this usually missed, spilling urine on the floor. . . . When dawn finally rose . . . we were all quite ill and shattered, crushed not only by the weight of fatigue but by the stifling, moist atmosphere and the foul odor of excrement. . . . There was no latrine, no provision. . . . On top of everything else, a lot of people had vomited on the floor. We were to live for days on end breathing these foul smells, and soon we lived in the foulness itself (Kessel, 51).

Transport by boat, in the case of many Soviet prisoners, was even worse: "most people were seasick and they just had to vomit on those down below. That was the only way to perform their natural functions too" (Knapp, 59). From the beginning, that is, subjection to filth was an aspect of the survivor's ordeal. In Nazi camps especially, dirt and excrement were permanent conditions of existence. In the barracks at night, for example, "buckets of excrement stood in a little passage by the exit. There were not enough. By dawn, the whole floor was awash with urine and feces. We carried the filth about the hut on our feet, the stench made people faint" (Birenbaum, 226). Sickness made things worse:

Everybody in the block had typhus . . . it came to Belsen Bergen in its most violent, most painful, deadliest form. The diarrhea caused by it became uncontrollable. It flooded the bottom of the cages, dripping through the cracks into the faces of the women lying in the cages below, and mixed with blood, pus and urine, formed a slimy, fetid mud on the floor of the barracks

(Perl, 171).



~~▲~~ The latrines were a spectacle unto themselves:

52

There was one latrine for thirty to thirty-two thousand women and we were permitted to use it only at certain hours of the day. We stood in line to get into this tiny building, knee-deep in human excrement. As we all suffered from dysentery, we could rarely wait until our turn came, and soiled our ragged clothes, which never came off our bodies, thus adding to the horror of our existence by the terrible smell which surrounded us like a cloud. The latrine consisted of a deep ditch with planks thrown across it at certain intervals. We squatted on these planks like birds perched on a telegraph wire, so close together that we could not help soiling one another (Perl, 33).

Prisoners lucky enough to work in one of the camp hospitals, and therefore able to enjoy some measure of privacy, were not thereby exempt from the latrine's special horror: "I had to step into human excreta, into urine soaked with blood, into stools of patients suffering from highly contagious diseases. Only then could one reach the hole, surrounded by the most inexpressible dirt" (Weiss, 69). The new prisoner's initiation into camp life was complete when he "realized that there was no toilet paper"—

that there was no paper in the whole of Auschwitz, and that I would have to "find another way out." I tore off a piece of my scarf and washed it after use. I retained this little piece throughout my days in Auschwitz; others did likewise (Unsdorfer, 102).

Problems of this kind were intensified by the fact that, at one time or another, *everyone* suffered from diarrhea or dysentery. And for prisoners already starved and exhausted, it was fatal more often than not: "Those with dysentery melted down like candles, relieving themselves in their clothes, and swiftly turned into stinking repulsive skeletons who died in their own excrement" (Donat, 269). Sometimes whole camp populations sickened in this way, and then the horror was overwhelming. Men and women soiled themselves and each other. Those too weak to move relieved themselves where they lay. Those who did not re-

cover were slowly enveloped in their own decomposition: "Some of the patients died before they ever reached the gas chambers. Many of them were covered all over with excrement, for there were no sanitary facilities, and they could not keep themselves clean" (Newman, 39). Diarrhea was a deadly disease and a source of constant befoulment, but it was also dangerous for another reason—it forced prisoners to break rules: 53

4

Many women with diarrhea relieved themselves in soup bowls or pans for "coffee"; then they hid the utensils under the mattress to avoid the punishment threatening them for doing so: twenty-five strokes on the bare buttocks, or kneeling all night long on sharp gravel, holding up bricks. These punishments often ended in the death of the "guilty" (Birenbaum, 133).

In another case a group of men were locked day after day in a room without ventilation or toilet facilities of any kind. Next to a window by which guards passed they discovered a hole in the floor. But to use it a man had to risk his life, since those caught were beaten to death. "The spectacle of these unfortunates, shaking with fear as they crawled on hands and knees to the hole and relieved themselves lying down, is one of my most terrible memories of Sachsenhausen" (Szalet, 51).

The anguish of existence in the camps was thus intensified by the mineral movement of life itself. Death was planted in a need which could not, like other needs, be repressed or delayed or passively endured. The demands of the bowels are absolute, and under such circumstances men and women had to oppose, yet somehow accommodate, their own most intimate necessities:

Imagine what it would be like to be forbidden to go to the toilet; imagine also that you were suffering from increasing severe dysentery, caused and aggravated by a diet of cabbage soup as well as by the constant cold. Naturally, you would try to go anyway. Sometimes you might succeed. But your absences would be noticed and



57  
# you would be beaten, knocked down and trampled on. By now, you would know what the risks were, but urgency would oblige you to repeat the attempt, cost what it might. . . . I soon learned to deal with the dysentery by tying strings around the lower end of my drawers (Maurel, 38-39).

With only one exception, so far as I know, psychoanalytic studies of the camp experience <sup>maintain</sup> that it was characterized by regression to "childlike" or "infantile" levels of behavior. This conclusion is based primarily on the fact that men and women in the concentration camps were "abnormally" preoccupied with food and excretory functions. Since infants show similar preoccupations, psychoanalytic experts <sup>assume</sup> that men and women react to extremity by "regression to, and fixation on, pre-oedipal stages" (Hoppe, 79). Here, as in general from the psychoanalytic point of view, context is not considered. The fact that the survivor's situation was itself ~~abnormal~~ "abnormal" is simply ignored. That the preoccupation with food was caused by literal starvation therefore does not count; and the fact that camp inmates were forced to live in ~~filth~~ filth is likewise overlooked.

The case for "infantilism" has been put most forcefully by Bruno Bettelheim. A major thesis of his book *The Informed Heart* is that in extreme situations men are reduced to children; and in a section entitled "Childlike Behavior" he simply equates the prisoners' objective predicament with behavior inherently regressive. Bettelheim observes, for example—and of course this was true—that camp regulations were designed to transform excretory functions into moments of crisis. Prisoners had to ask permission in order to relieve themselves, thereby becoming exposed to the murderous whim of the SS guard to whom they spoke. During the twelve-hour workday, furthermore, prisoners were often not allowed to answer natural needs, or they were forced to do so while they worked and on the actual spot where they worked. As one survivor says: "If anyone of us, tormented by her stomach, would try to go to a nearby ditch, the guards would release their dogs. Humiliated, goaded, the women did not leave their places—they waded in their own excrement" (Zywulska, 67). Worst of

all were the days of the death marches, when prisoners who stopped for any reason were instantly shot. To live they simply had to keep going:

55  
Urine and excreta poured down the prisoners' legs, and by nightfall the excrement, which had frozen to our limbs, gave off its stench. We were really no longer human beings in the accepted sense. Not even animals, but putrefying corpses moving on two legs (Weiss, 211).

Under such conditions, excretion does indeed become, as Bettelheim says, "an important daily event." But the conclusion does not follow, as he goes on to say, that prisoners were therefore reduced "to the level they were at before toilet training was achieved" (132). Outwardly, yes; men and women were very much concerned with excretory functions, just as infants are, and prisoners were "forced to wet and soil themselves" just as infants do—except that infants are not "forced." Bettelheim concludes that for camp inmates the ordeal of excremental crisis "made it impossible to see themselves as fully adult persons any more" (134). ~~He does not argue that the external situation reduced prisoners to childlike mentality; he simply observed prisoners doing things that only children normally do, and he assumes that such behavior is the direct expression of a psychic condition characterized by extreme regressiveness.~~ He does not distinguish between behavior in extremity and civilized behavior; for of course, if in civilized circumstances an adult worries about the state of his bowels, or sees the trip to the toilet as some sort of ordeal, then neurosis is evident. But in the concentration camps behavior was governed by immediate death-threat; action was not the index of infantile wishes but of response to hideous necessity.

The fact is that prisoners were systematically subjected to filth. They were the deliberate target of excremental assault. Defilement was a constant threat, a condition of life from day to day, and at any moment it was liable to take abruptly vicious and sometimes fatal forms. The favorite pastime of one *Kapo* was to stop prisoners just before they reached the latrine. He would force an inmate to stand at attention for questioning; then make him "squat in deep knee-bends until the poor man could no longer



58 by destroying itself (a consolation which no longer means much, since the perimeter of atomic destruction is infinite). The exercise of totalitarian power, in any case, does not stop with the demand for outward compliance. ~~It~~ <sup>It</sup> seeks, further, to crush ~~the human spirit~~ <sup>to obliterate that</sup> the human spirit, ~~the active inward principle whose strength depends on its freedom from entire determination by external forces.~~ And thus the compulsion, felt by men with great power, to seek out and destroy all resistance, all spiritual autonomy, all sign of dignity in those held captive. It was not enough just to shoot the Old Bolsheviks; Stalin had to have the show trials. He had to demonstrate publicly that these men of enormous energy and spirit were so utterly broken as to openly repudiate themselves and all they had fought for. And so it was in the ~~the~~ camps. Spiritual destruction became an end in itself, quite apart from the requirements of mass murder. The death of the soul was aimed at. It was to be accomplished by terror and privation, but first of all by a relentless assault on the survivor's sense of purity and worth. Excremental attack, the physical inducement of disgust and self-loathing, was a principal weapon.

But defilement had its lesser logic as well. "In Buchenwald," says one survivor, "it was a principle to depress the morale of prisoners to the lowest possible level, thereby preventing the development of fellow-feeling or co-operation among the victims" (Weinstock, 92). How much self-esteem can one maintain, how readily can one respond with respect to the needs of another, if both stink, if both are caked with mud and feces? We tend to forget how camp prisoners looked and smelled, especially those who had given up the will to live, and in consequence the enormous revulsion and disgust which naturally arose among prisoners. Here was an effective mechanism for intensifying the already heightened irritability of prisoners towards each other, and thus for stifling in common loathing the impulse toward solidarity. Within the camp world all visible signs of human beauty, of bodily pride and spiritual radiance, were thereby to be eliminated from the ranks of the inmates, ~~and only the SS in~~ <sup>in camp</sup> ~~the camp~~ <sup>the camp</sup> The prisoner was made

to feel subhuman, to see his self-image only in the dirt and stink of his neighbor. The SS appeared superior not only by virtue of their guns and assurance, but by their elegant apartness from the ~~filth~~ <sup>filth</sup> of the prisoner's world. In Auschwitz prisoners were forced to march in the mud, whereas the clean roadway was reserved for the SS. 59

And here is a final, vastly significant reason why in the camps the prisoners were so degraded. This made it easier for the SS to do their job. It made mass murder less terrible to the murderers, because the victims appeared less than human. They *looked* inferior. In Gitta Sereny's series of interviews with Franz Stangl, commandant of Treblinka, there are ~~moments~~ <sup>insight</sup> of fearful ~~insight~~. Here is one of the most telling:

"Why," I asked Stangl, "if they were going to kill them anyway, what was the point of all the humiliation, why the cruelty?"

"To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies," he said. "To make it possible for them to do what they did" (101).

In a lecture at the New School (New York, 1974), Hannah Arendt remarked that it is easier to kill a dog than a man, easier yet to kill a rat or frog, and no problem at all to kill insects—"It is in the glance, in the eyes." She means that the perception of subjective being in the victim sparks some degree of identification in the assailant, and makes his act difficult in proportion to the capacity for suffering and resistance he perceives. Inhibited by pity and guilt, the act of murder becomes harder to perform and results in greater psychic damage to the killer himself. If, on the other hand, the victim exhibits self-disgust; if he cannot lift his eyes for humiliation, or if lifted they show only emptiness—then his death may be administered with ease or even with the conviction that so much rotten tissue has been removed from life's body. And it is a fact that ~~the~~ <sup>in camp</sup> procedure of "selection"—to the left, life; to the right, death—was based on physical appearance and on a certain sense of inward collapse or resilience in the prospective victim. As a survivor of Auschwitz puts it:



60 Yes, here one rotted alive, there was no doubt about it, just like the SS in Bitterfield had predicted. Yet it was vitally important to keep the body clear. . . . Everyone [at a "selection"] had to strip and one by one, parade before them naked. Mengele in his immaculate white gloves stood pointing his thumb sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left. Anyone with spots on the body, or a thin *Muselmann*, was directed to the right. That side spelt death, the other meant one was allowed to rot a little longer (Hart, 65). ■

With water in permanent shortage; with latrines submerged in their own filth; with diarrhea rife and mud everywhere, strict cleanliness was just not possible. Simply to *try* to stay clean took extraordinary effort. As one survivor says: "To pick oneself up, to wash and clean oneself—all that is the simplest thing in the world, isn't it? And yet it was not so. Everything in Auschwitz was so organized as to make these things impossible. There was nothing to lean on; there was no place for washing oneself. Nor was there time" (Lewinska, 43). That conditions *were* "so organized" was a ~~moment of~~ dreadful discovery:

At the outset the living places, the ditches, the mud, the piles of excrement behind the blocks, had appalled me with their horrible filth. . . . And then I saw the light! I saw that it was not a question of disorder or lack of organization but that, on the contrary, a very thoroughly considered conscious idea was in the back of the camp's existence. They had condemned us to die in our own filth, to drown in mud, in our own excrement. They wished to abase us, to destroy our human dignity, to efface every vestige of humanity, to return us to the level of wild animals, to fill us with horror and contempt toward ourselves and our fellows

(Lewinska, 41-42).

With this recognition the prisoner either gave up or decided to resist. For many survivors this moment marked the birth of their will to fight back:

There and then I determined that if I did not become

61 the target of a bullet, or if I were not hanged, I would make every effort to endure. No longer would I succumb to apathy. My first impulse was to concentrate on making myself more presentable. Under the circumstances this may sound ludicrous; what real relation was there between my new-found spiritual resistance and the unsightly rags on my body? But in a subtle sense there *was* a relationship, and from that moment onwards, throughout my life in the camps, I knew this for a fact. I began to look around me and saw the beginning of the end for any woman who might have had the opportunity to wash and had not done so, or any woman who felt that the tying of a shoe-lace was wasted energy (Weiss, 84).

Or as another survivor says, ~~again in disregard of the relationship between survival and care for physical appearance:~~

But from the instant when I grasped the motivating principle . . . it was as if I had been awakened from a dream. . . . I felt under orders to live. . . . And if I did die in Auschwitz, it would be as a human being, I would hold on to my dignity. I was not going to become the contemptible, disgusting brute my enemy wished me to be. . . . And a terrible struggle began which went on day and night (Lewinska, 50).

~~The struggle was against self-loathing and the destruction of dignity, against a subjection to filth amount to a deliberate self-image. Here the conscious purpose is simply to keep the body clean.~~

~~The enemy's intention was for us to be devoured by filth. Very well then, it was necessary to keep oneself clean. That, too, was part of the battle.~~

~~(Lewinska, 50-51)~~

~~It was a part of the battle for life itself.~~ Washing, if only in a ritual sense—and quite apart from reasons of health—was something prisoners needed to do. They found it necessary to survival, odd as that may seem, and those who stopped soon died:

At 4:30, "coffee"—a light mint infusion without nourishment and with a repulsive taste—was distributed. We



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

(Levi, 36).

63

The basic structure of Western civilization or perhaps of any civilization, insofar as the processes of culture and sublimation are one, is the division between body and the spirit, between concrete existence and symbolic modes of being. In extremity, however, divisions like these collapse. The principle of compartmentalization no longer holds, and ~~the organic being~~ <sup>organic being</sup> becomes the immediate locus of selfhood. When this happens, body and spirit become the ground of each other, each bearing the other's need, the other's sorrow, and each responds directly to the other's total condition. If spiritual resilience declines, so does physical endurance. If the body sickens, the spirit too begins to lose its grip. There is a strange circularity about existence in extremity: survivors preserve their dignity in order "not to begin to die"; they care for the body ~~as a matter of~~ as a matter of "moral survival."

For many among us, the word "dignity" no longer means much; along with terms like "conscience" and "spirit" it has grown suspect and is seldom used in analytic discourse. And certainly, if by "dignity" we mean the projection of pretense and vainglory, or the ways power cloaks itself in pomp and ritual pride; if, that is, we are referring to the parodic forms of this principle, as men exploit it for justification or gain—just as honor and conscience are exploited and likewise parodied, although real in themselves—then of course the claim to dignity is false. But if we mean an inward resistance to determination by external forces; if we are referring to a sense of innocence and worth, something felt to be inviolate, autonomous and untouchable, and which is most vigorous when most threatened; then, as in the survivor's case, we come upon one of the constituents of humanness, one of the irreducible elements of selfhood. Dignity, in this case, appears as a self-conscious, self-determining ~~faculty~~ <sup>faculty</sup> whose function is to insist upon the recognition of itself *as such*.

64 Certainly the SS recognized it, and their attempt to destroy it, while not successful in the survivor's case, was one of the worst aspects of the camp ordeal. When cleanliness becomes impossible and human beings are forced to live in their own excretions, their pain becomes intense to the point of agony. The shock of physical defilement causes spiritual concussion, and, simply to judge from the reports of those who have suffered it, subjection to filth seems often to cause greater anguish than hunger or fear of death. "This aspect of our camp life," says one survivor, "was the most dreadful and the most terrible ordeal to which we were subjected" (Weiss, 69). Another survivor describes the plight of men forced to lie in their own excreta: they "moaned and wept with discomfort and disgust. Their moral wretchedness was crushing" (Szalet, 78). In the most bizarre cases, defilement caused a desperation bordering on madness, as when a group of prisoners were forced "to drink out of the toilet bowls":

The men could not bring themselves to obey this devilish order; they only pretended to drink. But the block-fuehrers had reckoned with that; they forced the men's heads deep into the bowls until their faces were covered with excrement. At this the victims almost went out of their minds—that was why their screams sounded so demented (Szalet, 42).

But why is contact with excrement unbearable? If actual discomfort is minor, why is the reaction so violent? And why does the sense of dignity feel most threatened in this particular case? The incident of the toilet bowls, cited above, has been examined from a psychoanalytic point of view, the conclusion being this:

infantile satisfactions . . . could be acquired only by means against which culture has erected strong prohibitions. . . . Enforced breakdown of these barriers was capable of bringing the prisoner near to mental disintegration (Bluhm, 15).

The extreme suffering of those men thus resulted from a breach in cultural taboo. Their demented screams issued from the rending of subliminal structures, in response to violation of those "cleanliness habits" which are "enforced by any culture at an

early stage of training" (17). The survivor's struggle against an excremental fate, to speak more plainly, is a function of "toilet training"—although that term is not used in the article from 65 which I am quoting, since the degree of reduction it implies, even from a psychoanalytic perspective, seems altogether disproportionate to the violence of the prisoners' experience. The article goes on, however, to suggest that the depth at which the scream originates may reveal, beyond the relative and flexible demands of culture, the violation of a limit or boundary not relative in the same sense:

however, the normal adult of our civilization shares the disgust toward the contact with his excrements with members of tribes who live on the lowest levels of culture. This disgust seems to be a demarkation line, the transgression of which can produce effects much more devastating than the appearance of more or less isolated regressive symptoms (17).

From the psychoanalytic point of view, moral anguish is a product of conflict between cultural demands and the regressive desire to subvert them. But if we keep in mind that all regression is in the service of pleasure, or ~~release~~ from pain (which was Freud's definition of pleasure), then the whole theory of infantile regression, in the survivor's case, becomes absurd. The scream of those desperate men was indeed a defense against dissolution, but to reduce their extraordinary pain to the violation of a taboo, or any restriction merely imposed, seems entirely to miss the point. In any case, the inhibiting authority of "toilet training" is not so central to selfhood that infraction causes the personality to disintegrate. Only once in Western culture has this been viewed in terms of psychic crisis (among the bourgeois classes in the nineteenth century, with their radical reliance on physical rigidity and, as a consequence, their prurient forms of sexual satisfaction); and I would suggest, finally, that such "training" is the ritual organization of an inherent biological process. Plenty of taboos went by the board in the concentration camps, but not this one—not, that is, transgression of a "demarkation line" which runs deeper than cultural imposition. What human beings will or



the goal of civilization, the outcome of a process of sublimation or transcendence or etherealization (call it what you wish) by which actual events and objects become the images, myths and metaphors that constitute man's spiritual universe. Transformation of the world into symbol is perpetual; thereby we internalize actuality and stay in spiritual, if not in concrete, connection with those primal experiences from which, as civilized beings, we have detached ourselves. 67

But this activity can be reversed. When civilization breaks down, as it did in the concentration camps, the "symbolic stain" becomes a condition of literal defilement; and evil becomes that which causes real "loss of the personal core of one's being." In extremity man is stripped of his expanding spiritual identity. Only concrete forms of existence remain, actual life and actual death, actual pain and actual defilement; and these now constitute the medium of moral and spiritual being. Spirit does not simply vanish when sublimation fails. At the cost of much of its freedom it falls back to the ground and origin of meaning—back, that is, to the physical experience of the body. Which is another way of saying that, in extremity, symbols tend to actualize.

We might say, then, that in extremity symbolism *as symbolism* loses its autonomy. Or, what amounts to the same thing, that in this special case everything is felt to be inherently symbolic, intrinsically significant. Either way, meaning no longer exists above and beyond the world; it re-enters concrete experience, becomes immanent and invests each act and moment with urgent depth. And hence the oddly "literary" character of experience in extremity, to which I shall return in Chapter Six. It is as if amid the smoke of burning bodies the great metaphors of world literature were being "acted out" in terrible fact—death and resurrection, damnation and salvation, the whole of spiritual pain and exultation in passage through the soul's dark night.

The following event, for example, seems literary to the point of embarrassment. It is the kind of incident we might expect at the climax of a novel, valid less in itself than as a fiction bearing meaning, and therefore acceptable through the symbolic state-



68 ment it makes, the psychic drama it embodies. This event, however, happens to be real. It occurred during the last days of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, it was the fate of many men and women. Armed with handguns and bottles of gasoline, the ghetto fighters held out for fifty-two days against tanks, field artillery and air strikes. So stubbornly did they resist that the Germans finally resorted to burning down the ghetto building by building, street by street, until everything—all life, all sign of man—was gone. The last chance for escape was through the sewers, and down into that foul dark went the remnant of the ghetto:

On the next day, Sunday, April 25, I went down . . . into the underground sewer which led to the "Aryan" side. I will never forget the picture which presented itself to my eyes in the first moment when I descended into the channel. Dozens of refugees . . . sought shelter in these dark and narrow channels awash with filthy water from the municipal latrines and foul refuse flushed from the private apartments. In these low, narrow channels, only wide enough for one person to crawl forward in a bent position, dozens of people lay jammed and huddled together in the mud and filth

(Friedman, 284).

They stayed below, sometimes for days, making their way toward the "free" side, coming up occasionally to see where they were, and then simply waiting. Many died, but through the combined effort of Jewish and Polish partisans, some were rescued and survived:

On May 10, 1943, at nine o'clock in the morning, the lid of the sewer over our heads suddenly opened, and a flood of sunlight streamed into the sewer. At the opening of the sewer Krzaczek [a member of the Polish resistance] was standing and calling all of us to come out, after we had been in the sewer for more than thirty hours. We started to climb out one after another and at once got on a truck. It was a beautiful spring day and the sun warmed us. Our eyes were blinded by the bright light, as we had not seen daylight for many weeks and had spent the time in complete darkness. The streets were crowded with people, and everybody . . . stood

still and watched, while strange beings, hardly recognizable as humans, crawled out of the sewers

(Friedman, 290).

If that were from a novel, how easily we might speak of rites 69 of passage; of descent into hell; of journey through death's underworld. We would respond to the symbolism of darkness and light, of rebirth and new life, as, blessed by spring and the sun, these slime-covered creatures arise from the bowels of the earth. And we would not be misreading. For despite the horror, it all seems familiar, very much recalling archetypes we know from art and dreams. For the survivor, in any case, the immersion in excrement marks the nadir of his passage through extremity. No worse assault on moral being seems possible. Yet even here there was life and hope, as if these shit-smeared bodies were the accurate image of how much mutilation the human spirit can bear, despite shame, loathing, the trauma of violent recoil, and still keep the sense of something inwardly inviolate. "Only our feverish eyes," said one survivor of the sewers, "still showed that we were living human beings" (Friedman, 289). ■

ONE SURVIVOR remarks that in camp he did not wake fellow prisoners when one of them was having a nightmare; he knew that no matter how bad the dream might be, reality was worse. And what, really, could be worse than to wake up in a concentration camp? "The most ghastly moment of the twenty-four hours of camp life," says a survivor of Auschwitz, "was the awakening, when, at a still nocturnal hour, the three shrill blows of a whistle tore us pitilessly from our exhausted sleep and from the longings of our dreams" (Frankl, 31). "The moment of waking," says another, "was the most horrible" (Zywulska, 33). Or finally:

Awakening is the hardest moment—no matter whether these are your first days in the camp, days full of despair, where every morning you relive the painful shock, or whether you have been here long, very long, where each morning reminds you that you lack strength to begin a new day, a day identical with all previous days  
(Szmaglewska, 4).

The wonder is they got up at all. Camp prisoners were permanently exhausted, they were often sick, and a night's sleep was four or five hours at most. Under such stress we might expect a retreat into unconsciousness, into coma, as when a person faints from shock or excess of pain. Where did the strength to get up come from? And why return to a reality so terrible?

Prisoners were driven awake by fear, by anxiety, and often by the blows of a whip or club. But mainly they got up for the same reason any of us do: essential activities have to be performed; organisms must interact with, and find protection from, their environment. Prisoners either got up or died; they either faced an unbearable world knowing they would have to bear it, or gave up. The whole of the survivor's fate is in that moment. It was always a battle in itself, but it was also part of a larger fight, not just







76 where everything—possessions, clothes, hair, name—was stripped from them. The magnitude and speed of these events made sane response impossible. What kind of sense, after all, was the incoming prisoner to make of his or her first march through Auschwitz:

Corpses were strewn all over the road; bodies were hanging from the barbed-wire fence; the sound of shots rang in the air continuously. Blazing flames shot into the sky; a giant smoke cloud ascended above them. Starving, emaciated human skeletons stumbled toward us, uttering incoherent sounds. They fell down right in front of our eyes and lay there gasping out their last breath (Newman, 19).

The otherness of the camps, their horror and apparent chaos, was not real by past standards; unable to root itself in familiar ground, the old self fell apart. A similar disintegration was suffered by Soviet prisoners who, as soon as they were arrested, were subjected to a process which would not end until the prisoner broke down and signed a false confession:

Interrogations by night and special cells ensure that the prisoner is not allowed to sleep for one moment. After five to eight days without sleep he is subject to increasingly severe hallucinations and these can be further intensified by blows. The prisoner loses his self-control. His personality begins to split, to dissolve and to be transformed. . . . He loses the power to distinguish between reality and possibility. He loses touch with himself. All that remains of him is a twitching point of reference between vague terror without an object, the pervasive feeling of imposed guilt and confusing hallucinations (Roeder, 11).

There are heroic accounts of resistance to that kind of treatment, especially Artur London's *The Confession* and Alexander Weissberg's *The Accused*. London broke down in the end, and even Weissberg, whose endurance seems superhuman, went through brief periods of collapse:

it had now been made clear that the examiner was not

interested in the truth and wanted fictitious self-accusations. If that were the case then I was really lost. . . . This feeling of being hopelessly rapped paralysed me. . . . So far I had confessed nothing, but I felt now that my reason was about to break down (Weissberg, 219).

77

Or as an American survivor of the Soviet camps told me: "Oh yes, after enough beating at the base of the spine, after enough kicks in the genitals, you would sign anything." To sign was to say to them and to yourself that you were not who you had been. Temporarily, the old self dissolved. And for ~~the~~ Soviet and Nazi prisoners alike, this first stage was decisive:

every new-comer immediately had to traverse a course of profound personal degradation and humiliation. Naked he was driven through the unbridgeable abyss that separated the two worlds, "outside" and "inside." It was the immediate effects of this terrifying act of compulsion that determined the ultimate destiny of a prisoner. There were two possibilities and within three months it became apparent which one would apply. By that time a man would have gone into an almost irresistible mental decline—if, indeed, he had not already perished in a physical sense; or he would have begun to adapt himself to the concentration camp (Kogon, 274).

In *The Informed Heart* Bruno Bettelheim observes that the "vast majority of the thousands of prisoners who died at Buchenwald each year died soon" (146). That was true everywhere in the world of the camps: newcomers had the highest death rate. We might therefore ask, as Bettelheim does, "why, in the concentration camp, although some prisoners survived and others got killed, such a sizable number simply died" (145). His answer is that they "died of exhaustion, both physical and psychological, due to a loss of desire to live" (146). Loss of desire to live is one of the primary symptoms of the period of initial collapse, and large numbers of men and women died because during this crucial stage of imprisonment they failed to strive for life with every fiber of their being. But still, loss of the will to live is a symptom, not a cause. The fact is that so many prisoners "died soon" for a complex of overwhelming forces which nothing in the whole of



world and thrust into life-and-death turmoil, to find a new inward center of gravity" (Kogon, 176). ■

80

Speaking of his own camp experience, Bettelheim observes that "right from the beginning I became convinced that these dreadful and degrading experiences were somehow not happening to 'me' as a subject, but only to 'me' as object" (127). Elie Cohen, another psychiatrist who survived the camps, calls this the "stage of initial reaction"; he too emphasizes the "subject-object split," and identifies it by describing his response to atrocity: "My reaction to this, I observed, was an apparent splitting of my personality. I felt as if I did not belong, as if the business did not concern me" (116). Viktor Frankl, a third psychiatrist to pass through the camps, divides the period of initial collapse into two stages: first shock, then apathy. The new prisoner undergoes "a kind of emotional death" (18), which Frankl sees as a "necessary mechanism of self-defense" (27). Cohen, however, points out that although apathy keeps madness and despair at a distance, it produces a dangerous disregard for the environment:

In my opinion the after-effect of the fright reaction in most prisoners was followed by the phase of apathy, which for many was a period fraught with extreme danger. As they took no interest in their surroundings and did not strive after self-preservation, reacting tardily and behaving as if they had been "sandbagged," their behavior was not such as is best suited to a concentration camp. The duration of this fright apathy is limited; I would estimate it at no more than one or two weeks. But after this the prisoner was not yet in a condition to make an attempt at adaptation, for with the dwindling of his apathy, mourning made itself felt to its fullest extent, and the mournfully depressive phase set in. . . . For many prisoners [this] period proved too long, so that they never had an opportunity to engage in the struggle for adaptation (169).

*that is the experience*  
of initial collapse in clinical terms; ~~the majority of survivors,~~ *however, do not use*

*technical language.*

~~through which to understand their experience,~~ For them entry into the camp world was characterized by an overriding sense of *nightmare* and *unreality*—two words which appear constantly when survivors refer to their first days and weeks:

All around us were screams, death, smoking chimneys making the air black and heavy with soot and the smell of burning bodies. . . . It was just like a nightmare and it took weeks and weeks before I could really believe this was happening (Hart, 93).

But unlike our use of such words (to inject a little drama into ordinary life), survivors speak this way because by any standard of communicable perception or past experience, the first weeks in camp were literally unreal and embedded in nightmare. "Not only during the transport," says Bettelheim, "but for a long time to come, prisoners had to convince themselves that this was real and not just a nightmare" (127).

To the extent that "reality" is a cultural construct, then of course the camps were unreal. ~~The West had been Christian for very long time, and was then from a world with love and faith.~~ At least in Western Europe there had been two centuries of steady advance in political and economic well-being, with much praise of "Progress" and "Humanity," on the assumption that these providential agencies were fully capable of taking a lost God's place. (Man was emerging from the dark past of his childhood.) The homeland of Kant and Goethe was renowned for its *Kultur*, for its *Geistesbildung*, and in Russia the new age of justice had arrived. Imbued with such preponderant "faith in humanity," how indeed were the victims to believe, let alone make sense of, the inhumanity massing to destroy them? Evil on such a scale was not believable. As one survivor says, "We fell victim to our faith in mankind, our belief that humanity had set limits to the degradation and persecution of one's fellow man" (Donat, 103). Or as another survivor puts it, this time in direct answer to our questions:

Why? Why did we walk like meek sheep to the slaughter-house? Why did we not fight back? . . . I

to myself: "Wake up! Wake up! You are having a nightmare!" I would look around me, trying to wake up, but alas, my eyes kept on seeing the same dismal picture. Finally, I would start to shake all over, and I would say to myself: "You are in a concentration camp, in an annihilation camp. Don't let them get you down." I didn't want to end up in the furnace; I wanted to live to tell of this (Newman, 20).

This survivor of Auschwitz would "call" to herself as if split into distant selves, the one passive, the other helpless but aware of the need to act. The dream is not a dream, there is no way out, and once she begins to admit the truth of her predicament the sense of unreality fades. By coming to face the evil of the world she is in she gains a perspective which sets her apart. Selfhood, realism, and the desire to live emerge together ("I didn't want to end up in the furnace") and culminate in the will to bear witness ("I wanted to live to tell of this"). ■

The survivor turns back to life because a process of healing, of inner repair, has had the time to complete itself. The mind grows able to respond once more, and here a final factor is evident, for very often the moment of waking occurred in response to a specifically human act or circumstance. In the following instance a survivor of Maidanek and Auschwitz describes her breakdown and the care of a friend which gave her the time and encouragement to recover:

The shock that followed the unexpected loss of my mother, my frantic terror at the sight of the watchtowers, the machine-guns . . . drove me almost to the point of insanity. . . . and at a time when I should have forced myself to be as resistant as possible, I broke down completely. . . . Meanwhile Hela fought with redoubled strength—for herself and for me. She shared every bite she acquired with me. . . . Had it not been for Hela's efforts, I would not have roused myself from my apathy and despair (Birenbaum, 94-6).

Suicide, or rather its failure, was also effective. It shocked the



Then when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory—alive. . . . I stood, rooted to the ground, unable to move, to scream, to run away. But gradually the horror turned into revolt and this revolt shook me out of my lethargy and gave me a new incentive to live. I had to remain alive. . . . It was up to me to save the life of the mothers, if there was no other way, then by destroying the life of their unborn children

(Perl, 80-81).

That kind of decision—to save life through death—was forced upon survivors ~~repeatedly and~~ <sup>repeatedly, and</sup> I shall return to it in Chapter Five. The point now is that like each morning's waking, these moments of return to the world are psychic acts of *turning*, from passivity to action, from horror to the daily business of staying alive—as if one turned one's actual gaze from left to right, from darkness to possible light. As one survivor says, "I simply did not dwell on the horrors I was living through" (Donat, 304). There was no other way, and to become a survivor, every inmate had to make this turn. Once it was made the possibility of coming through was greatly increased, for now some part, at least, of their fate was up to them. They now paid sharp attention, not to the horror or to their own pain, but to the development of objective conditions which had to be judged constantly in terms of their potential for life or for death. Survivors thus acquire a capacity for realism, impersonal and without the least illusion, a realism which one survivor has called "the inhuman frankness of Auschwitz"; and with it the ability to learn, to know, to fight back in small ways:

The longer we stayed in the camp, the more we gained in experience, our instincts sharpened, our vigilance developed and our reactions quickened. We acquired a greater capacity for adapting ourselves to conditions

(Birenbaum, 103).

They turned to face the worst straight-on, without sentiment or special hope, simply to keep watch over life. And when the moment of turning came, finally, it was attended by a strong sensation of choice, a feeling of new determination, as if the decision

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 *Musselmänner*, 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 (82).

87

To say "they went to their death like sheep" is easy enough, and we say it often indeed. It is an expression of terror, of course, terror and doubt to be concealed even as we imply that we know better than they what it must have been like to wake up in a concentration camp, to carry on through nightmare, to come back somehow to that world. Whatever our reasons, we can make such assumptions only by disregarding a cardinal fact about the survivor's experience: *all things human take time*. time which the damned never have, time for life to repair at least the worst of its wounds. It took time to wake, time for horror to incite revolt, time for the recovery of lucidity and will. Imagine the time ~~necessary~~ <sup>necessary</sup> to carry through a major resistance action in a concentration camp—the infinitely slow work of regenerating will and self-respect, of building trust, of making contacts, getting arms, sustaining deaths and betrayals, establishing accurate plans and then, together, moving as they did in Buchenwald, in Auschwitz, Sobibor, Treblinka. Everything depended on time, and in the interim chance ruled supreme. Any accumulation of too much bad luck at once—to be exhausted and starving and *then* get sick and *then* be savagely beaten—and the frail spirit broke. This happened most often to new prisoners; but it could happen to anyone, and the survivor's greatest fear was that through a run of bad luck he or she would sink irreversibly into the masses of the doomed.

In almost all accounts by survivors the spectacle of these truly



88 "dead souls" is mentioned, and always with the same mixture of pity and revulsion. In the Soviet camps they were called *dokhod-yaga*, the "goners," and the fear they inspire arises from the *visible* process of spirit in decay:

There was a man squatting on a rubbish heap. He must have broken down—mentally, I mean, and that was the end, physically too, in every case—and if he found a fish head, he tried to suck the eyes and did things like that  
(Knapp, 77).

4 That, for survivors, was worse than being killed outright. And it was always possible, for once the will to live had been regained it was constantly undermined by chance and despair. Prisoners survived by chance, they died by chance, and they *knew* it. ~~When made going on was difficult was that they were, clearly and fully, the hopelessness of struggle in a world of utter chance.~~ In one instance a group of women were rounded up at random and locked in the gas chamber. All night they stood jammed against each other waiting; at dawn they were released because the SS had run out of gas, and by the time the next supply arrived it was someone else's turn. And always, around that corner, around this one, there might be an SS man drunk and killing for the fun of it: "Their hands were never far from their revolvers and even without provocation they would draw them and shoot a prisoner in the face at close range" (Vrba, 209). It was indeed hopeless, and yet the alternative was either to quit and join the *Muselmänner*, or to strive anyway, *as if* chance were to some extent on one's side. A survivor of Birkenau put it this way: "She knows that a number of circumstances evoked by orders or accidents may cause her annihilation, but she knows too that there is a chance to escape death and that it is up to her to win the game" (Szmaglewska, 123).

But still it was hopeless. The striking fact is that from a logical point of view, resistance and survival were just not possible. The following dialogue, between two women in Auschwitz, expresses the general outlook among survivors:

"There's no hope for us."  
And her hand makes a gesture and the gesture evokes rising smoke.

"We must fight with all our strength."

"Why? . . . Why fight since all of us have to . . ."  
The hand completes the gesture. Rising smoke.

"No. We must fight."

"How can we hope to get out of here. How could anyone ever get out of here. It would be better to throw ourselves on the barbed wire right now."

What is there to say to her. She is small, sickly. And I am unable to persuade myself. All arguments are senseless. I am at odds with my reason. One is at odds with all reason (Delbo, 18).

89 The survivor's will to go on is illogical, irrational, stupid with another wisdom. ~~This is the paradox of life in death.~~ *He is* caught in a catapult of death and slung fiercely at a massive seamless wall which, at the last second, proves here and there to have a slight warp, a thin small crack. In extremity the function of intelligence is not to judge one's chances, which are zero, but to make the most of each day's opportunity for getting through *that* day: "I realized, after what I had seen, that my attitude to Auschwitz would have to change. No longer was it simply a question of surviving. It was a question of surviving today without thinking too much about tomorrow" (Vrba, 108). At any moment the survivor might be killed, might be hurt badly enough in mind and body to make *another* return impossible. But until then, he or she hangs on despite evidence on all sides that death is inevitable. As long as the spirit does not break, the survivor keeps mute faith in life. Against the knowledge of chance and hopelessness there is another, more intimate knowledge—an awareness of "that puzzling potential of inner strength," as one survivor says,

which permits your body to keep warm though the penetrating chill freezes the soil and clots the damp sand, which permits you to keep the cheerfulness of spirit though death and extermination are all about



you, which permits you to have faith that the Germans will lose though you are surrounded—take that railroad track, for instance, with its purposeful shipments—by evidence of their power (Szmaglewska, 125). ■

Life in extremity reveals in its movement a definite rhythm of decline and renewal. The state of wakefulness is essential, but in active experience it is less an unwavering hardness of spirit than a tenuous achievement with periods of weakness and strength. Survivors not only wake, but reawake, fall low and begin to die, and then turn back to life. This happened to individual inmates all the time. Sometimes just the shock of realizing that one was becoming a *Musselman* was enough to inspire new will. But often, too, the experience of renewal was shared, sometimes in moments of intense solidarity:

Pain and . . . fear . . . kept us awake. A cloudless sky, thickly set with glittering stars, looked in upon our grief-filled prison. The moon shone through the window. Its light was dazzling that night and gave the pale, wasted faces of the prisoners a ghostly appearance. It was as if all the life had ebbed out of them. I shuddered with dread, for it suddenly occurred to me that I was the only living man among corpses.

All at once the oppressive silence was broken by a mournful tune. It was the plaintive tones of the ancient "Kol Nidre" prayer. I raised myself up to see whence it came. There, close to the wall, the moonlight caught the uplifted face of an old man, who, in self-forgetful, pious absorption, was singing softly to himself. . . . His prayer brought the ghostly group of seemingly insensible human beings back to life. Little by little, they all roused themselves and all eyes were fixed on the moonlight-flooded face.

We sat up very quietly, so as not to disturb the old man, and he did not notice that we were listening. . . . When at last he was silent, there was exaltation among us, an exaltation which men can experience only when they have fallen as low as we had fallen and then, through the mystic power of a deathless prayer, have

awakened once more to the world of the spirit  
(Szalet, 70-71).

On its collective level, this movement away from, and then back toward, life and humanness was more apparent in the Soviet camps, where the impact of some rumor or special event would cause the mood of the entire camp to rise or fall. In the following instance a kind of general resurrection occurred when everyone in camp was allowed a "free" day, with no work and maybe a bit of extra food:

At every step, in every corner of the barrack, the approaching holiday could be sensed. I could never understand how so much politeness suddenly appeared from under the shell of indifference and mutual hatred. As they talked, the men showed each other so much courtesy and friendliness that, looking at them, I could almost forget that I was in prison. There was a stench of bad breath and sweat in the barrack, clouds of steam seeped in from the door and the faces seemed to blur in the murky light, but despite all this there was so much life and happy excitement, so much hope and feeling. . . . Good-night, good-night, excited voices whispered all around, sleep well, tomorrow is our holiday, tomorrow is a day of rest (Herling, 116).

And sometimes, finally, this kind of rebirth came with all the pain and mystery of actual birth, as if the two were but different instances of an identical process. To go into a camp "hospital" was not to expect improvement, since the main function of such places was to gather up the dead and dying. There was little treatment, often none at all, and here, ~~amid the stench and filth of rotting flesh~~, the diseases of the camp were assembled without precaution. In the Nazi camps, the worst cases were regularly "selected" for extermination, and terrible "experiments" were performed. A prisoner went into the camp hospital fairly sure that life was finished. The temptation to quit was very strong, and yet in these places too, many men and women regained the desire to live. And as experienced, it felt as if the power of life itself were pulling them back to the world:



**I**N *NIGHT*, Elie Wiesel records two moments of advice, two prescriptions for survival in the concentration camps. The first came from an "old" prisoner speaking to the new arrivals:

**We are all brothers, and we are all suffering the same fate. The same smoke floats over all our heads. Help one another. It is the only way to survive (52).**

The second was an anonymous inmate's comment:

**Listen to me, boy. Don't forget that you're in a concentration camp. Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else. Even of his father. Here, there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. Everyone lives and dies for himself alone (122).**

Help one another. Every man for himself. The conflict is classic, and nowhere more starkly stressed than in the concentration camp ordeal. For as soon as survivors wake to the reality of their predicament they must choose. They must decide which view will govern their behavior and their perception of camp life as a whole. In extremity the claims of radical self-interest seem sounder, more logical; and the second prescription—help only thyself—dominates the description of events in Wiesel's books: men fight among themselves, fathers contend with sons to the death. The rule of war was total, or so he implies. Yet Wiesel did not abandon his father, and the prisoner who gave kind advice was, after all, a man living in Auschwitz.

There is a contradiction in Wiesel's view of the camps, a contradiction which occurs so often in reports by survivors that it amounts to a double vision at the heart of their testimony. In *The Holocaust Kingdom*, Alexander Donat describes Maidanek as a world in which "the doomed devoured each other," but he includes another kind of evidence as well, for instance his near death from a beating he received for refusing to beat others, and the help he was given, when he was desperately in need of time

tains unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization's assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be. Secondary adjustments represent ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and the self that were taken for granted for him by the institution (188-89).

99

Goffman concludes by suggesting that "these [secondary adjustments] together comprise what can be called the *underlife* of the institution, being to a social establishment what an underworld is to a city" (199). In extremity this "underlife" becomes the literal basis of life.

During the ordeal of the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, and precisely in Goffman's sense, Chaim Kaplan made the following remark in his *Diary*:

In these days of our misfortune we live the life of *Marranos*. Everything is forbidden to us, and yet we do everything. Every Jewish occupation is under a ban, yet nevertheless we somehow support ourselves; true, we do it with grief, but we do survive" (174).

Trade was illegal, procuring medicines was illegal, schooling the children was illegal. So were things like meetings, movement outside the ghetto, and traveling the streets after curfew. The punishment was death, and yet all these activities were necessary to life and had to be carried on covertly, at constant risk.

One of the most persistent forms of "secondary adjustment," in both the camps and the ghettos, was smuggling. In the Warsaw Ghetto this kind of "illegal" activity involved everyone; it proceeded daily on both individual and organized levels, and as death by starvation increased, it grew to heroic proportions. There were periodic crackdowns, when dozens of smugglers were shot, and other, looser times when bizarre methods of every sort were used:

Specially constructed mobile ramps were set against the walls on both sides to smuggle over live cows and oxen. . . . From the window of a building . . . which overlooked the ghetto . . . a sheet metal pipe was lowered and milk poured across the racial boundary

(Goldstein, 78).



106 organized a little "festival" under the noses of our masters, it was resistance. When, clandestinely, we passed letters from one camp to another, it was resistance. When we endeavoured, and sometimes with success, to reunite two members of the same family—for example, by substituting one internee for another in a gang of stretcher bearers—it was resistance (Lengyel, 154).

On the surface, cooperation with camp administration appeared total. But underneath, moral sanity reasserted itself, response to necessity was characterized by resistance, and the worst effects of extremity were thereby transcended. In a literal sense, these countless, concrete acts of subterfuge constituted the "underlife" of the death camps. By doing what had to be done (disobey) in the only way it could be done (collectively) survivors kept their social being; and therefore their essential humanity, intact. ■

# — The effectiveness of "organizing" depended on teamwork, and stable social units were thereby created in which relations were personal and friendly. These small groups sprang up everywhere, but in addition there was another, much broader network of interaction. This was the black market, an impersonal system of acquisition and barter which ran full tilt in all the concentration camps. Like any black market, this one took advantage of privation and thrived on scarcity. It was exceptional only in the scope and daring of its operations, and perhaps also for the improbable items—bottles of Clos Vougeot, caviar, packs of Lucky Strike—which appeared as if by magic. Goods were acquired in all sorts of ways, from "organizing" and manufacture to theft and deals with guards and camp officials. Elaborate methods of trading evolved, many of them dangerous and all of them open to betrayal. Yet here was a vigorous underworld of interchange. Prisoners met as buyers and sellers, sometimes in friendship, more often in suspicion and cunning, but nevertheless as participants in a steady stream of activity which, in the end and despite grave abuse, supported the general struggle for life. A survivor of Auschwitz describes it this way:

Prices were determined by the scarcity of commodities,

107 the inadequacy of rations, and, of course, by the risks in securing the article. . . . The barter was a natural result of local conditions. It was difficult not to take part in it. I paid eight days' ration of bread for a piece of cloth to make a nurse's blouse. I also had to pay three soups to have it sewn (Lengyel, 78).

This was the underside of the underside, a dimension of "secondary" action which exploited vital needs but at the same time helped to fulfill them. And it was important for another reason. By playing on SS greed, the black market contributed to the spread of corruption in high places; and this in turn, weakened the discipline of the SS, not only among themselves, but more importantly in their control of camp affairs and therefore the lives of the prisoners. "Large-scale theft was possible," says a survivor of Auschwitz, "only because the S.S. men and women, who were supposed to supervise the prisoners at their work in the stores, stole themselves, in competition and accord with the prisoners" (Lingens-Reiner, 48). Power declined as guards and officers came more and more to depend on their victims:

For instance, the camp doctor, Dr. Rohde, before going on leave which he was spending with his wife, went to a Polish prisoner and asked the man to find him a nice present for her. What he got was a large pigskin dressing-case. When he returned from leave he told the prisoner that his wife had liked it very much and sent many thanks (Lingens-Reiner, 48).

The byways of trade and theft were often quite complicated, and sometimes even humorous:

I remember the round trip of a pair of battle-dress trousers. An S.S. man stole them from a comrade and sold them for stolen sugar to a prisoner working in the kitchen. The prisoner gave them to his girl friend in the woman's camp from whom they were stolen by another prisoner, a prostitute. Another S.S. man "confiscated" them as "illicit property," and gave them to a second prostitute with whom he had an affair. She sold them for spirits to a wardress, who bartered them for margarine, after which they returned to the first pris-

108 oner working in the men's kitchen. . . . So it happened with small things and with far more important things. And perhaps it was not altogether an evil, because even a black market is better than none at all

(Lingens-Reiner, 46).

Relatively few

~~Only "prisoners" prisoners had the energy and time for intricate of that kind.   
 ~~amorous adventures, and as the foregoing example   
 trade on the black market was mainly available to men   
 women with sufficient power to buy it.~~~~ Traffic in "illicit property" touched the rest of the camp population mainly on the level of small thefts, and these were so constant and widespread as to constitute a perpetual mode of exchange:

the uniformed SS Doctor Koenig rushes among the standing women. . . . Bowls and spoons fly with a clash, bread, rations of margarine and sausage end in the ditch. . . . From behind the brick barracks gypsies cautiously creep out. . . . In one second the ditch is empty, and the property has changed hands

(Szmaglewska, 71).

In the Soviet camps, stealing was nothing less than the way of life. As one survivor says:

Stealing was prevalent . . . in every camp in Russia. For eight years I never heard any denial of this. It could not be called dishonesty: it was simply a fight for life at any price (Ekart, 204).

The point is not so much the prevalence of stealing as the fact that amid this scramble of trickery and theft a semblance of order emerged—conditions of interchange which were tolerated in much the same way as we, when we play games, agree to abide by the "rules." Through practices that could be justified only by extreme need, a system of barter became possible, a partial recovery of human community through inhuman means. The wonder is not that a black market thrived or that stealing was rampant, but that these activities did not thrive more, did not become absolute. There was in all the camps a significant drive toward decency, a persistent tendency to transcend the amorality of initial



rette he lit. He'd take a piece of cotton, or stuffing from a pillow, or the lining of a quilted jacket, fluff it up and stretch it out very thin, then roll it up tight. Next he would put the cotton between two boards and rub them vigorously, faster and faster, sometimes for as long as fifteen minutes. . . . As soon as he smelled smoke, Vasha pulled out the rolled-up cotton, broke it at the point where it was smoldering, and very gently began to blow on it until it was completely aglow. Then, while he carefully shielded it in his hand, everyone who had a cigarette crowded eagerly around for a light. Vasha would take the first two puffs from every cigarette, drawing the smoke deep down into his lungs on each puff until it looked as if he were about to burst, hold the smoke as long as he could, then exhale it—into someone else's mouth (Ciszek, 91).

Strange practices, but organized with ritual correctness, with division of labor and reward. In the camps any kind of talent, any sort of item or possession, was put to enterprising use. Prisoners became expert scavengers, forever on the lookout for anything at all—"a piece of tinplate, a nail, a stick or a cigarette end" (Ekart, 32)—with which to transact "business." In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn's hero risks severe punishment to smuggle a piece of broken saw-blade past the guards. He knows that sooner or later another prisoner will be "in the market" and ready to trade. On such modes of exchange survivors depended for a life that was primitive and barren, but not without dignity, and not completely savage. Always on the verge of social dissolution, men and women managed to achieve sustaining order through forms of interchange which life itself—in all things the mother of invention—demanded of them. ■

Between conditions in Soviet and in Nazi camps there were obvious differences; and some of the latter, furthermore, were "official" killing centers while others were "merely" labor camps. Yet I have not hesitated to call all these places "death camps." More than three million people died in Auschwitz, but if the in-

oner had a craft, his or her chances were immeasurably better than average, since all kinds of skilled workers, from electrician to glassblower to cabinetmaker, were in constant demand. The one thing needful was a job which kept the prisoner away from "general work assignment" where inmates were inevitably shot or beaten to death. One might therefore work as a tailor, be a room orderly or a file clerk, a mechanic or a shoemaker. Many new prisoners were advised by seasoned inmates to lie: to say they knew carpentry or chemistry when they knew nothing of the sort. Thereby they avoided the first mass extermination and had time to either find or learn a skill that would keep them alive. No job insured survival, but anything helped. Some, like laundry detail, were valuable mainly to the prisoners who held them. Others, like working in Canada, benefited a wider circle of inmates. And others, as we shall see, were used by the "political" prisoners (members of underground resistance groups) to take a hand in their own fate, to gain a degree of control and thereby save thousands of lives. 113

The condition of life-in-death forced a terrible paradox upon survivors. They stayed alive by helping to run the camps, and this fact has led to the belief that prisoners identified not with each other but with their oppressors. Survivors are often accused of imitating SS behavior. Bruno Bettelheim has argued that "old prisoners" developed "a personality structure willing and able to accept SS values and behavior as its own" (169). But that needs clarification, for in order to act like an SS man the prisoner had to occupy a position of real power. A cook could lord it over other prisoners, a locksmith could not. Among *Kapos*, block-leaders and other high camp functionaries, there were indeed prisoners who accepted SS standards as their own—this man for instance:

His specialty was strangling prisoners with the heel of his boot, and he would stand erect in the pose of a Roman gladiator, enjoying the approval of the other *Kapos*, who would speak admiringly of a "good, clean job" (Donat, 179).



Then the overseer, a Czech-German "political," noticed what was going on. He immediately rushed over and began shouting, "You god-damned Jewish dog! You'll work the rest of the day without clothes! I'm sick of the trouble you lousy Jews give me!" He made a threatening gesture, and then roared, "Come with me!"

115

The SS guard left, confident that the baker was in good hands. Then the overseer took the baker into a tool-shed where it was warm, dressed him, washed his wounds, and gave him permission to stay in the shed until it was time to quit work (Weinstock, 156-57).

Or take Franz, the *Kapo* of an SS storeroom in Auschwitz. Every day crates of food were "accidentally" dropped and reported as "shipment damage." The contents were then "organized"—for Franz, for his men and others in need. In the "open," however, there was another Franz:

As we walked . . . past other kapos and SS men he began roaring at us. . . . As he shouted he swung at us with his club. To the passing SS men he looked and sounded a splendid kapo, heartless, brutal, efficient; yet never once did he hit us (Vrba, 90).

Imitation of SS behavior was a regular feature of life in the camps, and large numbers of prisoners benefited because positions of power were secretly used in ways which assisted the general struggle for life. Even small jobs—working as a locksmith for instance—dovetailed into the larger fabric of resistance:

We had access to more and better food, and were able to keep ourselves clean; we had sufficient clothing and footwear. In due time we were able to assist other prisoners. . . . We locksmiths had special passes . . . from the camp authorities. With these we were able to go outside the camp and also to visit the other camps at Birkenau. . . . Often enough we merely pretended to work. Many were the good door handles and locks that we unscrewed and screwed up again at the approach of an SS man. If we were to work effectively as contacts between the various resistance groups it was essential that we should be able to hang about in this way, espe-

118 could not possibly keep track of everything and everyone. In some cases prisoners were actually able to move from camp to camp, a situation the political underground regularly exploited to start or shore up resistance movements elsewhere: "They assigned a lot of dead people to the transports. They never knew who was dead, who was alive. We picked out a few dead ones and changed their numbers for our own. Then we reported to the proper transport" (Weinstock, 169). Prisoners took full advantage of loopholes, death was manipulated in favor of life, and the minimal latitude thus obtained was increased by another small circumstance: a large number of SS men were drunk much of the time. That was another crack through which life could seep. ■

In extremity life depends on solidarity. Nothing can be done or kept going without organizing, and inevitably, when the social basis of existence becomes self-conscious and disciplined, it becomes "political"—political in the ~~primary~~ elementary human sense, as in the following description by two survivors of Auschwitz:

Unlimited egoism and a consuming desire to save their own lives at the expense of their fellows were common phenomena among prisoners who were politically backward, for such people were quite incapable of realizing that in this way they merely strengthened the hand of the SS against the prisoners. . . . Our experience of other concentration camps (prior to Auschwitz) had taught us the vital need to live collectively. Political consciousness and contact with others in the struggle against Nazism were necessary conditions of success; it was this that gave people a sense of purpose in life behind barbed wire and enabled them to hold out

(Kraus and Kulka, 1, 27).

Prisoners were "politically backward" if they did not see that collective action is more effective than individual effort, or if they did not understand that solidarity becomes power in proportion to the degree of disciplined order. Many never understood, and

theirs was "the tragedy of all people who live under the illusion that isolation is individualism":

119 the great "individualists" of our free days, the unorganized and backward workers, the cynics, not to mention business men who knew nothing of organized action . . . all disintegrated morally. They became witless tools for the Nazis. They groveled for favours although their groveling degraded them still further. And they did not live long in Buchenwald (Weinstock, 125, 95).

Kogon observes that "the lone wolves here were always especially exposed to danger" (280), and Bettelheim has noted that "non-political middle class prisoners" were among the first who "disintegrated as autonomous persons" (120). Another survivor sums it up this way: "survival . . . could only be a social achievement, not an individual accident" (Weinstock, 74).

Human relations in the camps took as many forms as they generally take. The most narrow but intense social unit was the family; beyond that were old friends, and beyond that a sense of collective identity among those from the same town or area—bonds reinforced by the earlier ordeal of deportation which all had suffered together. Another strong basis for solidarity was nationality. There are endless tales of the toughness of national groups sticking together, and all survivors recall occasions when they received help from, or offered help to, a stranger who was a fellow countryman. The trouble with national allegiance, when it became a unit of resistance, was that such groups vied among themselves for control of life-resources. Conflict on the level of national groups only abated when the political underground, cutting across national barriers, became strong enough to take command of resistance activities throughout the camp.

In discussing the achievements of the political prisoners, what counts is not the many different factions or differences in principle, but that as members of the underground they worked together, and that as time went on they achieved greater and greater power as an organized resistance movement. This was true mainly in the Nazi camps, however. In the Soviet camps there were oc-



almost all the camps, the underground went out of its way to save children. In Buchenwald a Hungarian transport arrived containing four hundred and ten boys. Resistance leaders bargained with the SS and convinced them that if these young prisoners were allowed to live they would make excellent workers. At the same time, members of the underground were assigned to each boy individually, to provide food, clothing, and above all a sense of care: "On the day of liberation every child stood in the yard, alive and healthy. . . . This was Buchenwald's greatest miracle" (Weinstock, 193). ■

125

It was all miraculous, or no, it was not. God kept away from the concentration camps, and what was done, miraculous as it might seem, was done by human mind and will—by men and women doing what they could to make life possible. And their victories were never large: "In actual fact, their powers and opportunities were very limited. . . . They could only intervene in a few exceptional cases, and then only at the risk of their own lives" (Poller, 97). The enemy was infinitely more powerful, and the fight to survive was thus a kind of guerrilla warfare—small battles aimed at strengthening centers of defense. Members of the underground, furthermore, were not motivated by sentiment or faith in high causes. They were fighting for life on the principle that only through tight discipline and ruthless tactics was survival, and therefore help, possible. Resistance activities were governed by a "cold, unemotional, devastatingly logical approach to every problem" (Vrba, 193). And what this demanded of individual prisoners was the capacity to face moments of "hard choice." Life was saved by using death strategically, and this involved a moral dilemma which members of the underground simply had to accept and live with, no matter how difficult and cruel, no matter how hurtful to innocence.

In many of the Nazi camps, women who gave birth were automatically sent with their children to the ovens. To save at least *some* of these lives required the following decision by members

which I added to the water. When the meat was ready I invited him to share it with me. He contributed bread to the common repast (Gliksman, 310).

135

Because they had nothing to exchange, or did not wish to in this case, the other prisoners did not expect to join in the meal. In the camp situation, furthermore, salt was rare and valuable, and by offering it the donor knew he was placing himself in a position to share the other's food. But of course, the difference between salt and meat is substantial, and to keep the symmetry of exchange correct, the second man added bread.

To make the most of their combined wealth, the two prisoners went through a ritual, understood by all, of "giving, receiving, repaying." Their act is the concentration camp version of an elementary social institution which Marcel Mauss has called the "gift relation" or "gift morality." Mauss observes that in societies of an archaic or segmentary nature, gift-giving becomes a medium through which people "are constantly embroiled with and feel themselves in debt to each other" (31). Which is to say that men and women give in expectation of return, and those who receive feel bound to repay. Yet the whole of this process is more instinctive than reasoned upon, and the full power of the gift relation depends finally on an absence of conscious calculation. People give and receive, not to bribe or acquire, but to establish relations. Since the gift is identified with the donor, the act of giving creates a personal tie, and Mauss suggests that "the gift itself constitutes an irrevocable link especially when it is a gift of food" (58). Gift-giving, in other words, creates bonds at once spiritual and concrete, social and economic. It is one of the ties which bind.

→ Exchange brings people together, and makes them conscious of their worth in each other's eyes. Self-interest turns to goodwill, and the gift relation becomes one of the constitutive structures of social being. Through rituals of exchange the dehumanizing effect of xenophobia and mistrust—everything which keeps us apart and at war—is transformed into trust, acquaintance, respect, conditions which bring men together and allow them to



136 function as units distinct yet in concord, each honoring the other's claim to dignity. The gift transforms hostility into allegiance; ~~and speaking of the grand ceremonies among archaic chieftains~~ ~~Mass concludes: "nothing better expresses human nature than the festival and warfare" (89).~~

~~The sense of warfare is~~ Even among animals, as ethologists point out, social bonding is achieved through rituals which suppress or transform aggression: "in fact, this bond is the firmer, the more aggressive the particular animal and species is" (Lorenz, 216). If this is true for animals, <sup>very</sup> ~~and~~ people in primitive societies, how ~~much more~~ important for men and women in the concentration camps, where conditions of deprivation and fear intensified the tendency toward mistrust and hostility. Through giving and sharing the state of potential warfare was transcended. In its place sprang up binding moments of frail but real communion:

There are days when the chief is not here. He locks the barracks and leaves complete freedom to the locked-in workers. These are wonderful days. A small bribe changes Inga [the *Kapo*] into an angel, graciously open to any further proofs of friendship. From hiding places pots, saucepans, frying pans appear. Someone has potatoes, somebody else a ration of margarine, another has onions and someone else a spoonful of flour for gravy. . . . On the top of the stove, no larger than twenty square inches, fifty women do their cooking, working in accord and harmony (Szmaglewska, 100).

~~The bond suggested by sharing is further enforced by pleasure the deep, almost festive delight of sharing people and food blessed with abundance. In such circumstances the function of pleasure cannot be discounted; the feeling of life's abundance brings out the "best" in people, no more clearly, more intensely than when the event, the pleasure, is shared.~~

~~Experiences which give pleasure is biologically significant. The value of food, its "meaning" is a perception learned and shared through the killing years of life experience, during which almost all behavior is determined by the search for food. If this is~~

ally a quest for that which sustains it, and food-sharing thus draws on a depth of urgency and import which may be felt by starving men and women with mystical intensity. In *The First Circle* Solzhenitsyn says: "eating is not something shameful, to be despised, but one of life's most delectable experiences, revealing the very essence of our existence" (313). Students of evolution point out, furthermore, that sharing began with the invention of hunting, which required collective activity in the getting and disposal of food, including division of labor and systems of communication, and that in a strict sense this was the beginning of an existence specifically human. From then on, man's relation to food has generated his social relations, which is only to say, with Marx, that economic needs are basic to everything else. The social significance of food, and even more the impact of its biological priority, can hardly be overestimated, despite the tendency of civilized people, safe and well-fed, to belittle such matters. 137

In the concentration camps food was the primary life-resource, and sharing it meant giving one's own immediate means to life. The principal food was bread, which was nothing less than the survivor's vital wealth. As a Soviet survivor puts it:

The word "bread" is a magic word. He who can get bread can live; he who has no bread perishes. . . . Whenever one of our comrades, because of hunger and the urge for self-preservation, bartered one of his hitherto concealed articles of clothing or some other possession with the local population, it was always in exchange for bread (Nork, 57).

Bread, the staff of life. Fernand Braudel has suggested that since the invention of agriculture, about 12,000 years ago, the eating habits of the human race can be summed up very briefly: "Eating consists of a lifetime of consuming bread, more bread, and still more bread and gruels" (89). We forget that for the vast majority of human beings, life on earth has always been barren and more or less desperate, and that for them bread was no mean achievement. In the camps this was certainly so, and survivors

~~... of it. ... There is a certain degree of ... in the stomach takes supreme, and ... would give ... and ... (Bernard, 31).~~ But whatever form it took, food-sharing was ~~a~~ a mode of human interchange; and in the camps it allowed the survivor's all but defeated humanity to be regained and kept going:

It became a regular custom in the factory—bearing witness to increased solidarity—that a jug of warm liquid or bread slops passed from hand to hand, among all those at the same work-table. Each woman took a sip, first the sick, then the healthy, by turn. . . . If anyone managed to flavor the water with a pinch of salt acquired somewhere, a scrap of margarine, or clove of garlic, all her comrades without exception enjoyed it. This was a good custom, a humane custom, even though the conditions of our lives were becoming increasingly bestial (Birenbaum, 147).

It was more than a custom; it was, and is, one of the structures of humanness.

"Gift morality," did not, of course, issue in an articulated system of ethics among prisoners. It remained implicit in concrete acts and relations. But in one all-important way a kind of morality did become conscious. In all the camps, Soviet and Nazi alike, there was one law and one law only which all prisoners knew and accepted. This was the "bread law," as it came to be called. And in a definite and clear-cut sense this particular "law" was the foundation and focal point of moral order in the concentration camps. A survivor of Sachsenhausen describes its origin and enforcement:

theft occurred continually in the prisoners' barracks, ours as well as others. Hunger tormented us all incessantly and transformed men into irresponsible beasts. Even those who had formerly passed for honorable men stole from their comrades the bits of bread that many had laid by from their evening ration for the next day. By day, all with one voice condemned the theft. By night, the stealing was repeated, just the same. In our



there would be neither the time nor the peace necessary for man's fundamental activities:

no culture of the earth . . . no commodious building  
. . . no account of time . . . no society; and, which is  
worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death;  
and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and  
short (107).

141

Hobbes' aim, in *Leviathan*, was to rationalize force and provide a naturalistic basis for ethics. He wished to define government as a power dedicated to the life and well-being of the community through enforcement of an order based on nature's laws. His principal assumption is that life or nature *protects itself* through forms of necessary behavior which are at once natural and human. Hobbes was thus a forerunner of the Enlightenment in arguing that even the moral law is but a finer version of nature's law. His hope as a social philosopher was to find cause in nature itself for the ethical imperatives on which social harmony and fruitful life depend. He would have agreed that the survivor's behavior is inherently moral, and *has* to be, since over time conditions of amoral struggle destroy not only the possibility of human fulfillment, but finally the fabric of existence itself. He was mistaken in one thing only, for like the Enlightenment thinkers to follow him, he assumed that the natural order is a rational order.

Morality and society do not rest on reason, although the critique of them does. But certainly they rest on something, and something too which, in a stricter sense than Hobbes could have known, deserves the name *nature*. The biological sciences confirm the fact that all life depends on systems, that everywhere a tendency to order governs behavior. From cells to men, life-forms possess both internal and external means of bonding and communication. The degree of social behavior among "higher animals" is certainly very high, having evolved through a process of natural selection to the present range of structures, all of which serve the cause of survival. We are beginning to understand, in other words, that "man came to sociability not by arrangement,

by rational decision, but from the natural primary disposition which he shares with all other higher animals" (Portman, 70).  
142 Social organization is a function of life itself, and in man it reaches a pitch of interrelatedness and mutual recognition which in fact constitutes, or is the prior condition for, humanness as we know it.

Hobbes was right in his way. Nature itself—by which I mean the system of living creatures—guards against dissolution and chaos; not through control by government, nor even by rational adherence to "laws of nature," but through the emergence, during times of prolonged crisis, of structures of behavior whose purpose is to maintain the social basis of life. Order emerges. That, as biologists like to observe, is the first and most striking fact about life, since entropy or the tendency to dissolution characterizes all non-living kinds of organization. For survivors this is crucial. Uprooted and flung into chaos, they do what they have to do in order to stay alive, and in that doing achieve enough of a social structure to meet the crisis humanly, together. After the period of initial collapse comes reintegration, a process which usually occurs gradually, in accord with the fact that all things human take time. In special cases, however, it can happen remarkably fast, as in the following example (~~one of many such~~) from the ordeal of mass deportation:

Ninety-six persons had been thrust into our car, including many children who were squeezed in among the luggage. . . . ~~When the car started that half-hour~~  
~~As the first hour and then~~ As the first hour and then the second passed, we perceived that the simplest details of existence would be extremely complicated. Sanitary disposal was out of the question. . . . As the journey stretched endlessly, the car jerking and jolting, all the forces of nature conspired against us ninety-six. A torrid sun heated the walls until the air became suffocating. . . . The travelers were mostly persons of culture and positions from our community. . . . But as the hours slipped away the veneers cracked. Soon there were incidents and, later, serious quarrels. . . . The children cried, the sick groaned; the old people la-

mented. . . . As night fell we lost all concept of human behavior and the wrangling increased until the car was a bedlam. . . . Finally, the cooler heads prevailed and a semblance of order was restored. A doctor and I were chosen captains-in-charge (Lengyel, 6-7).

143

The "veneer" of cultivated behavior, which served well enough in normal times, was not equal to such stress. Fear and panic were the initial response, and for a time all was chaos. But then, as necessity bore down and hysteria gave way to realism, a more elementary kind of order, or at least a readiness, began to function. A condition came into being which allowed the "cooler heads" to be heard. Amid this mess they held an election, they came to agree on basic responsibilities, and settled down to face their common plight. This achievement may have been but a "semblance" of past order, but it was sufficient to keep the ninety-six people in that boxcar sane and alive and above the threshold of brutality.

From the last days of the Warsaw Ghetto, when the SS was systematically hunting down everyone, comes another example, ~~about a group of many such~~. Those who remained took refuge in cellars, in attics, behind false walls, where ~~in a dark and hidden place~~ they waited:

The bunker grew increasingly crowded and stuffy. Anyone who went to the water-tap or toilet collided with others or stumbled over their neighbors in the darkness. There was no end to the disputes and squabbles, fights over nothing, insults, name-calling. Exhausted by the want of fresh air and the most elementary facilities, tortured by incessant fear and uncertainty, people began losing their self-control. The bunker became a real hell. . . . ~~People were dying like flies~~ Yet, in the midst of this suffering, there grew up a solidarity, a mutual understanding and sympathy. It was no longer necessary to shout for quiet, lest the SS track us down, nor ask too long for neighborly help. People helped one another, even shared the last drops of medicine, without caring whether someone was a relative or a stranger, a friend or unknown, poor or rich. The differences between us



disappeared. In the end, our mutual and tragic fate had united us into one great family (Birenbaum, 71-75).

144 Civility disintegrates and chaos prevails. Then slowly, in sorrow and a realism never before faced up to, the mass of flailing people grow quiet and neighborly, and in the end rest almost peaceful in primitive communion. In this and other instances,

the simple, shapeless agglomeration of human beings assembled by chance reveals a hidden structure of available wills, an astonishing plasticity which takes shape according to certain lines of force, reveals plans and projects which are perhaps unfeasible but which lend a meaning, a coherence to even the most absurd, the most desperate human acts (Semprun, 205).

Order emerges, people turn to one another in "neighborly help." This pattern was everywhere apparent in the world of the camps. Giving and receiving were perpetual, and we can only imagine the intensity of such transactions. When men and women know they are dying, smallest favors can shake the frail world of their being with seismic force. The power of such moments is enormous, and the bonds thus created, ~~whether they lasted for~~  
~~days or years~~, go far deeper than guilt or pride or ordinary obligation. And perhaps the most striking thing about this kind of giving, apart from the extreme gratitude it could generate, is the fact that compassion played no part:

Yet, how little sometimes suffices to save a perishing man: a glance, a word, a gesture. Once I gave a fellow prisoner a boiled potato and he never stopped thanking me for having saved his life. Another time I helped someone to regain his feet after he had fallen during a march. He not only reached our destination alive, but survived the war; and he maintains that without my help that one time he would never have gotten up, he would have been killed where he lay. In the camp it was easier to get a piece of bread than a kind word. Prisoners helped one another as best they could, but they shied away from sentiment. Help, yes; compassion, no (Donat, 237).

Compassion means to "suffer with." It is an act of imaginative

All around and beneath her she could hear strange submerged sounds, groaning, choking and sobbing: many of the people were not dead yet. The whole mass of bodies kept moving slightly as they settled down and were pressed tighter by the movements of the ones who were still alive. . . . Then she heard people walking near her, actually on the bodies . . . , occasionally firing at those which showed signs of life. . . . One SS man . . . shone his torch on her . . . but she . . . gave no signs of life.

A. KUZNETSOV

*Babi Yar*

That corpse you planted last year in <sup>your</sup> garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

T. S. ELIOT

*The Waste Land*

IN 1959 Stanley M. Elkins put forward his slave-as-sambo thesis in *Slavery*, arguing that the personality of the American slave had been fundamentally regressive and infantile. Elkins does not examine direct evidence; he uses a "comparative" method, and his main comparison is with inmates of the German concentration camps. To identify the Southern plantation with Auschwitz is senseless, of course; but the comparison is still significant, not for what it tells us of either slaves or survivors, but for the assumptions that are made about behavior in extremity. Elkins takes it for granted that in the camps men and women lost their capacity to act as morally responsible adults, and the point of his "comparison" is to demonstrate that this also happened to American slaves. Specifically, he states that "old prisoners," by which he means the survivors, suffered "deep disintegrative effects" (107); that the "most immediate aspect of the old inmates' behavior . . . was its *childlike* quality" (111); and finally that "all" survivors were "reduced to complete and childish dependence upon their masters" (113). Elkins goes on to say that ~~the~~ ~~process of radical~~ regression began with the abandonment of previous ethical standards, and to make his point he quotes as representative a brief statement by a survivor of Auschwitz. In Elkins' context, here is her remark:

One part of the prisoner's being was thus, under sharp stress, brought to the crude realization that he must thenceforth be governed by an entire new set of standards in order to live. Mrs. Lingens-Reiner puts it bluntly: "Will you survive or shall I? As soon as one sensed that this was at stake everyone turned egotist" (109-10).

In extremity, in other words, everyone fights alone; and the "entire new set of standards" comes from the camp system itself. But is there not a contradiction here? Childlike behavior is not



. . . All those who were too ill to get out of bed were lost from the outset. . . . The rest of the prisoners did everything in their power to obstruct the doctor and to save one or other of the victims; I do not think that a single one among us withheld her help. We would hide women somewhere in the hut. . . . We would smuggle them into "aryan" huts. . . . We would put their names on the list of patients due for release (76-7).

Under the pressure of a concentration camp you grew more closely attached to people than you would have done otherwise in such a short time (162).

The pursuit of self-interest was certainly a determinant of behavior in the camps, but it was everywhere countered by an unsuppressible urge toward decency and care, a multitude of small deeds against the grain of one's "best" interest. Prisoners looked out for themselves first of all, but also for one another when and however they could. In the whole body of testimony by survivors there is no better description of this contradiction than in the book by Lingens-Reiner:

Ena Weiss, our Chief Doctor—one of the most intelligent, gifted and eminent Jewish women in the camp—once defined her attitude thus, in sarcastic rejection of fulsome flattery and at the same time with brutal frankness: "How did I keep alive in Auschwitz? My principle is: myself first, second and third. Then nothing. Then myself again—and then all the others." This formula expressed the only principle which was possible for Jews who intended—almost insanely intended—to survive Auschwitz. Yet, because this woman had the icy wisdom and strength to accept the principle, she kept for herself a position in which she could do something for the Jews. Hardly anybody else in the camp did as much for them and saved so many lives as she did (118).

At least in this instance, Elkins' thesis is not borne out by the evidence from which he quotes, and ~~his~~ <sup>if for a time, his</sup> "sambo" theory of slave behavior ~~has been discredited by more recent studies.~~ <sup>But the attitudes which informed his perceptions are still current,</sup> ~~and if for a time his argument~~ was accepted, that was not be-

152 cause he had offered solid evidence but because by comparing slavery to the survivor's experience he was able to mobilize the deeply disturbing and largely uncontrolled range of reaction which attends our idea of the concentration camps. ~~But if he was wrong, and the SS, whose brutal attitude some fear, is by what sort of mind and heart, was able to do this, it is a challenge to those conditions.~~

Here is how he sums it up:

Daily life in the camps, with its fear and tensions, taught over and over the lesson of absolute power. It prepared the personality for a drastic shift in standards. It crushed whatever anxieties might have been drawn from prior standards; such standards had become meaningless. It focused the prisoner's attention constantly on the moods, attitudes, and standards of the only man who mattered [the SS guard]. A truly childlike situation was thus created: utter and abject dependency. . . . It is no wonder that the prisoners should become "as children." It is no wonder that their obedience became unquestioning, that they did not revolt, that they could not "hate" their masters (122).

Elkins ~~speaks with conviction, but not~~ is expressing the prevailing view. But power is never absolute, especially over time, and it is not true that the SS guard was the "one significant other" on whom the prisoners' needs depended. Social bonding among prisoners themselves was a universal phenomenon in the camps. And of course it is not true that survivors were morally crushed, that they lost all sense of prior standards, that moral sanity was meaningless. Certainly it is not true that they did not revolt; to live was to resist, every day, all the time, and in addition to dramatic events like the burning of Treblinka and Sobibor there were many small revolts in which all perished. Prisoners who were capable, furthermore, of organizing an underground and of systematically subverting SS intentions were not behaving "as children." And it is not true, finally, that hatred was absent. Survivors seethed with it, they speak of it often, they describe terrible acts of revenge. In *Prisoners of Fear* the author praises one of her comrades for "the ice-cold self-control by which she hid her abysmal hatred of the German rulers" (123) in order to exploit



and multiply meanings, is the essence of civilization. And here the psychoanalytic method correctly assumes that nothing is to be taken at face value. Our actions are invested with memories, wishes and values reaching far beyond the performance itself, and no act is simply and wholly significant in its immediate, concrete function. Historically, psychoanalysis ~~was not~~<sup>originated</sup> just as the *symboliste* movement was occurring in the arts, and it is tempting to see in both a common pursuit. Both read facts as symbols, both search out the mysteries of an invisible drama, and both take it for granted that in any act or situation there is more than meets the eye. Survivors act as they do because they must—the issue is always life or death—and at every moment the meaning and purpose of their behavior is fully known. We, on the other hand, act for all kinds of reasons, some known and others unconscious, some practical and others governed by an internal will that can only be guessed at. For us behavior requires interpretation; indeed, interpretation validates experience, and hence the usefulness of the psychoanalytic approach.

But only for us. Attempts to interpret the survivor's experience—to see it in terms other than its own—have done more harm than good. The outstanding spokesman, in this respect, has been Bruno Bettelheim, whose application of the psychoanalytic model to survival behavior has been definitive. Bettelheim was in Buchenwald and Dachau for a year, before systematic destruction became fixed policy and at a time when prisoners could still hope for release, but he was there and speaks with that authority. His first analysis of the camp experience—"Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations"—appeared in 1943, adding the weight of precedence to a position which has never been challenged and which has influenced all subsequent study. Even among laymen his ideas are known and accepted. His version is *the* version, and in *The Informed Heart* it takes its final, polemical form. Bettelheim argues that prisoners in the camps exhibited the following general traits: they became "incompetent children"; they identified with the SS and were "willing and able to accept SS values and behavior"; they fell into an "anonymous mass," without so-

cial base or organization; and they possessed no "autonomy," by which Bettelheim means the capacity for dramatic acts of self-assertion.

156

Bettelheim's view differs sharply from that of other survivors—Ernst Wiechert and Ernest Rappaport, for example—who were in Buchenwald at the same time. His claims are not substantiated by the bulk of testimony by survivors, including the comprehensive report by Eugen Kogon, who was a member of the underground and was in Buchenwald from the beginning to the end. Bettelheim's attack on Anne Frank and her family is perhaps the essential expression of his outlook. He suggests that their decision to stay together and go into hiding was stupid—a judgment which disregards the situation in Holland, where the population at large helped many Jews to escape in this way. Rather, he argues, they should have abandoned their commitment to each other: each should have fought alone, each shooting down the Germans as they came. Where the guns were to come from, or how scattered individuals were to succeed when nations failed, he does not say.

Bettelheim develops his argument in terms of a dramatic contrast between the individual, who possesses "autonomy," and the masses, who do not possess "autonomy." In many cases this becomes a contrast between Bettelheim himself and "others":

they appeared to be pathological liars, were unable to restrain themselves, unable to separate between reality and their wishful or anxious day dreams. So to the old worries, a new one was added, namely, "How could I protect myself from becoming as they are?" (114).

This may refer to prisoners during the stage of initial collapse, but Bettelheim does not say so. He is describing what appears to him to be the general situation, and this contrast between himself and other prisoners is in fact the theme of his book. It is evident not only in the sense of isolation and ~~superiority~~ superiority which attends references to himself, but also in an animus toward other prisoners in general. At one point he attacks camp functionaries by suggesting that inmates with "privileged" positions had "a greater need to justify themselves":



160 Whatever his conclusions, Bettelheim's argument for "autonomy" is a defense of human dignity, a call to that principle in man which resists determination by otherness. His fear is not only that human beings can be made helpless, but that prevailing tendencies in modern thinking have accepted the condition of victimhood as final. A primary assumption of his own discipline is that the self is forever in painful bondage to its past. And much of social, economic and political theory—conservative as well as radical—takes it for granted that external forces shape internal being, or finally that the self is constituted by forces it neither controls nor understands but only suffers. Perhaps the case for man-as-victim has been put most strongly by behaviorism, which assumes outright that environment is omnipotent and that the human self is ever and always a unilateral function of the world in which it finds itself. Applied to the concentration camps, the conclusion can only be that monstrosity breeds monstrosity, and therefore that no one survived. Those not killed in body most surely perished in spirit, for men and women could not long endure such inhumanity without themselves becoming inhuman. One sees why B. F. Skinner, in his attack on freedom, also finds it necessary to attack dignity: as long as people persist in their refusal to be determined by forces external to themselves, the belief in freedom will likewise persist as a by-product of this basic recalcitrance.

That the concentration camps were a kind of "experiment" has often been noted. Their aim was to reduce inmates to mindless creatures whose behavior could be predicted and controlled absolutely. The camps have so far been the closest thing on earth to a perfect Skinner Box. They were a closed, completely regulated environment, a "total" world in the strict sense. Pain and death were the "negative reinforcers," food and life the "positive reinforcers," and all these forces were pulling and shoving twenty-four hours a day at the deepest stratum of human need. And yet, survivors are proof that the "experiment" did not succeed. ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ Their behavior was of course determined by camp conditions, but not in the way behaviorism or current theories of victimhood assume. The distinction overlooked is between responses to necessity which are really unilateral and therefore at one with necessity, and responses which

161 are strategic and therefore provoked by, but opposed to, the same necessity. Facing extreme pressure, human beings either acquiesce or resist or do both. Like the psychoanalytic approach, behaviorism does not take into account the duality of action in extremity. It too fixes attention on the "primary" level of adjustment, precisely on those activities which are informed by, and expressive of, camp logic. On this level it appears that prisoners succumbed to their environment (and life depended on the success of this deception). But on the "secondary" level, as we have seen, prisoners were pushing hard against camp controls. And it is perhaps worth noting, finally, that the behaviorist assumption was held in practice by the SS themselves, who never doubted that force and fear could break anyone, could reduce all behavior to a function of their world. ~~That, of course, has always been the logic of power. If power is enough, force and human beings will bend, break, but they will not become hostile. If power becomes hostile to life, it is because it is not a life-forming power.~~

In a way at first surprising, Bettelheim's idea of heroism dovetails with the view of man as victim—just as psychoanalysis and behaviorism, based on opposite principles, agree in the case of extremity. <sup>But in fact</sup> The celebration of man's "indomitable spirit" and <sup>our</sup> ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ of victimization are rooted in the <sup>single</sup> ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ belief, as old as Western culture, that human bondage can be transcended only in death. Death is at once the entrance to a world of fulfillment unobtainable on this earth and the proof of a spirit unvanquished by fear or compromise. Neither is possible to men and women getting by as best they can from day to day; and a life not ready, at any moment, to give itself for something higher is life enchained, life cowed and disgraced by its own gross will to persist. Survival in itself, not dedicated to something *else*, has never been held in high esteem and often has been viewed with contempt. This complex of attitudes is at the heart of the Christian worldview; it had already been expounded in detail by Plato, and



162 before that invested with grandeur by Homer. In the *Iliad*, the progress of a Greek advance is stopped by sudden mist and darkness; whereupon the great Ajax prays aloud for Zeus to send light to continue the battle, even if light should bring death. Many centuries later, in *On the Sublime*, Longinus remarked: "That is the true attitude of an Ajax. He does not pray for life, for such a petition would have ill beseeemed a hero" (67).

Just so; when we say of someone that he or she "merely" survives, the word "merely" carries real if muted moral objection. And we say it all the time, as if to be alive, or simply to struggle for life, were not in itself enough. For "meaning" and "significance" we look elsewhere—to ideals and ideologies, to religion and other metaphysical systems; to anything, any *higher* cause or goal which defines life in terms other than its own and thereby justifies existence. Survivors are suspect because they are forced to do openly, without a shred of style or fine language to cover themselves, what the rest of us do by remote control. The bias against "mere survival" runs deep, and derives its force from the fact that all of us think and act in terms of survival, but at a crucial remove and with all the masks and stratagems which cultivated men and women learn to use—of which there would seem to be no end. As Nietzsche observed, man would rather will nothingness than have nothing to will, nothing with which to push life beyond itself. But as Nietzsche implies, the problem with these symbolic superstructures is that they redeem life ~~through negation~~ by negating it.

One of the side-effects of civilization is that life is enhanced by denigrating actual life processes. But is this a side-effect merely? Might it not be the paradox of civilization itself—a direct result of, or even a condition for, the split between mind and body which characterizes the structure of civilized existence as we know it? Surely Descartes was not original when he declared that mind and matter are separate entities, nor was his "I think therefore I am" anything more than the commonplace bias of culture itself. Within the framework of civilization, experience has always been divided into physical and spiritual realms, immediate

and mediated modes, concrete and symbolic forms, lower and higher activities. And all things "higher," as we know, are by definition *not* concerned with life itself; not, that is, with life in its physical concreteness. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Erving Goffman has observed that human activities take place either in "front" or in "back" regions. We "present" ourselves (our idealized selves) to ourselves and others in "front regions," while keeping our props, especially those which attend our biological needs, out of sight in "back regions":

The line dividing front and back regions is illustrated everywhere in our society. As suggested, the bathroom and bedroom . . . are places from which the downstairs audience can be excluded. Bodies that are cleansed, clothed, and made up in these rooms can be presented to friends in others. In the kitchen, of course, there is done to food what in the bathroom is done to the human body. ~~Part of the front region is the kitchen, where the body is prepared for presentation to the audience. The back region is the bathroom, where the body is cleansed and made up.~~ (123).

Goffman is talking about American society, but the compartmentalization of existence to which he points can be found everywhere, most dramatically at events which have a religious or an official function, places and ceremonies associated with power or the sacred. In all such instances, a division between front and back, higher and lower, is strictly upheld. And as far as ritual and technology permit, everything "lower" is kept out of sight—and thereby out of mind. Mary Douglas has called this "the purity rule":

According to the rule of distance from physiological origin (or the purity rule) the more the social situation exerts pressure on persons involved in it, the more the social demand for conformity tends to be expressed by a demand for physical control. Bodily processes are more ignored and more firmly set outside the social discourse, the more the latter is important. A natural way of investing a social occasion with dignity is to hide organic processes (12).



heart is left me, and the same flesh and blood which likewise can love and suffer and desire and remember, and this is, after all, life. *On voit le soleil!*

(■ Mochulsky, 141).

166  
His awakening had nothing to do with belief, and in his letter he thanks neither God nor the Tsar. He has simply realized what he did not know before. Life's fundamental goodness is now clear, and he wants his brother to know that through the years in prison this knowledge will be his strength. Using exactly the same details of the letter, Dostoevsky re-described his mock execution nearly twenty years later in *The Idiot*. The Prince is obsessed by two images of man-condemned: one is executed, the other pardoned. Myshkin's desire is to conduct his life in terms of what they, the condemned, know. So too with Father Zosimo, and finally Alyosha and Mitya, in *The Brothers Karamazov*. They know that life justifies ideals and not, as Ivan thinks, the reverse. They know that "life is in ourselves and not in the external."

Survivors develop a faith in life which seems unwarranted to others. Dostoevsky did, and so did Bertrand Russell, to take a final example from *our* world. While in Peking during the winter of 1920-21, Russell came down with double pneumonia. Complications set in and "for a fortnight," as he tells us, "the doctors thought every evening that I should be dead before morning" (180). But with the coming of spring his health returned, and at some point during recovery Russell had an extraordinary experience, which he describes in Volume Two of the *Autobiography*:

Lying in my bed feeling that I was not going to die was surprisingly delightful. I had always imagined until then that I was fundamentally pessimistic and did not greatly value being alive. I discovered that in this I had been completely mistaken, and that life was infinitely sweet to me. Rain in Peking is rare, but during my convalescence there came heavy rains bringing the delicious smell of damp earth through the windows, and I used to think how dreadful it would have been to have never smelt that smell again. I had the same feeling about the light of the sun, and the sound of the wind. Just outside my windows were some very beautiful

which found its historical basis only after 1945.

The concentration camps are plainly an embodiment of the archetype we call *Hell*. They were "hell on earth," as everybody says, and George Steiner has gone so far as to suggest that they were a deliberate actualization of the demonic tradition in art and literature and theology, the most terrible instance of myth turning into history: 169

The camp embodies, often down to minutiae, the images and chronicles of Hell in European art and thought from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. It is these representations which gave the deranged horrors of Bel-sen a kind of "expected logic." . . . The concentration and death camps of the twentieth century, wherever they exist, under whatever regime, are *Hell made immanent*. They are the transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface. They are the deliberate enactment of a long, precise imagining (53-54).

We must hope that Steiner is wrong, for if the kind of determinism implied in this "transference" is real—if man eventually and necessarily realizes his deep imaginings in fact—then the end will come, the bombs will fall, the myth of the World's End, imagined for millennia, will arrive in actuality. That is possible, but so (employing Steiner's model) is a new Golden Age, another of man's intenser imaginings. The mind of man holds everything, and our common fate may indeed, as Freud came to believe, be bound to the eventual outcome of a battle between conflicting psychic forces.

But finally I want to mark a lesser symmetry between Hell and the camps, simply the comparison itself. We make it all the time, and so do survivors. But for us it is misleading because the archetype informs our perception and we end up seeing the SS as satanic monsters and the prisoners as condemned souls. When we imagine what the survivor's experience must have been, we thus project our own fantasies, our own worst fears and wishes. From our remote vantage point only the horror is visible; the real behavior of survivors goes unobserved because it was covert, undramatic, not at all in accord with our expectations of heroism.



Milton's Hell is a "universe of death," and his high style should not deflect us from the fact that Auschwitz might be described in exactly the same terms (although not in Miltonic diction, which 171 applied to the camps would generate lunatic irony). But the camps are there, in Milton's poem and in Dante's, in the under-realms of Homer and Virgil, in Shakespeare's *Lear*. From the world's literature we can abstract a set of conditions which make up the demonic or infernal depths as men have imagined them always. Northrop Frye has done this, arriving at an archetypal outline of the "world that desire totally rejects":

the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion. . . . the world also of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly (147).

Frye is describing an imaginary place, but he could be talking about a real world where men and women were forced to carry gigantic rocks back and forth to no purpose; where prisoners were hung by their hands on trees; where they lay face down in sewage and mud doing push-ups, and where to this day Dachau and Auschwitz stand as monuments to an age which is ours. The move from fiction to history argues the prophetic nature of art and perhaps even, as Steiner implies, a kind of cultural determinism. But it is also the special case of a more general relation between contrary realms of experience, between civilization and extremity, which can be formulated this way: what we experience symbolically, in spirit only, survivors must go through in spirit *and* in body. In extremity, states of mind become objective, metaphors tend to actualize, the word becomes flesh.

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell has noted the "curious literariness" of experience in the trenches. He observes that "one way of using canonical literature to help suggest the actuality of front-line experience was to literalize what before had been figurative" (165). Thus Shakespeare's metaphor for fallen majesty—*Lear* saying of his hand, "It smells of mortality"—becomes plain fact in the rank air of a world where corpses of men and horses lay rotting for months. ~~For the millions~~

~~... living ... in the ... of ...~~  
~~... was ...~~  
 Fussell concludes that "the drift of modern history domesticates the fantastic and normalizes the unspeakable" (74), and that beginning with World War I the perception of extreme events reveals a definite tendency: "The movement was toward myth, toward a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant. In short, toward fiction" (131).

But toward fiction which had actualized; and anyone sensitive to aesthetic form, sometimes called "significant form," is bound to wonder at this odd convergence of art and life. When hundreds of women in the Soviet prison at Yaroslavl were rounded up for a routine transport to the camps, Eugenia Ginzburg remembers a small incident which, like a Joycean epiphany, revealed in a moment the shattering of personal life under Stalin. "They made us give up the photographs of our children," she writes, and "I can still see the great pile of them on the stone floor of the yard" (268). That is already an example of significant form: the event in itself embodies and shows forth its larger meaning. But there is more, and Ginzburg goes on to remark:

If, today, a film director were to show such a heap in close-up, he would certainly be accused of striving for a forced effect—especially if he were also to show a soldier's heavy boot trampling on the pile of cards, from which little girls in ribbons and boys in short pants looked up at their criminal mothers. The critics would say, "That's too much." Nevertheless, that is exactly what happened. One of the warders had to cross the yard and, rather than walk around the pile, stamped straight across the faces of our children. I saw his foot in close-up, as though it were in a film (268).

Extremity makes bad art because events are too obviously "symbolic." The structure of experience is so clear and complete that it appears to be deliberately contrived. But the great majority of books and documents by survivors are not consciously formal or deliberately shaped. Their testimony is in no way "lit-

erary," and yet everywhere great and terrible metaphors are embedded in events described. Hell first of all, and then "spiritual" states of being like purity and defilement, doom and salvation, death and rebirth. The following example ~~(one of many)~~ involves a small massacre in a German forest:

Then we were ordered to dig out the soil in the marked area. . . . others were told to break off small branches and twigs. . . . As evening closed in, the S.S. men decided that the pit was deep enough. . . . prisoners were told to stand in one row facing the forest. . . . I watched the dancing rays of the sun glinting through the trees. . . . Suddenly terrible screams, accompanied by the crackle of rifle fire. . . . There was a stampede to the right and to the left. But the women could not run far. A few steps and they were riddled with bullets. I stood in front of the pit quaking. For a fleeting moment, through glazed eyes, I saw my companions in the pit. Some of them were still moving convulsively. I heard a loud rifle volley, then silence and darkness. . . . Is this death? . . . I try to raise my arm but can't. I open my eyes but see nothing. . . . I am lying inert in the dark. . . . I try to raise myself and I find myself sitting up. Fresh branches are brushing my head. It is dark and there are stars above me. . . . As consciousness returns, my mind begins to clear. . . . Trembling and weeping I cry out in a faltering voice: "Are any of you alive? Come out if you are!" And on the other side of the pit sits a dark figure. "It's me," says Charlotte. But in the pit itself no one moves. We two are the only survivors (Weiss, 74-75).

Bullets did not tear through her, her heart did not stop. But she was certain—her body was certain—that death was coming. She felt that she had died, she lay for hours among the lifeless mass of her comrades, and then got up. Is this the famous valley of death through which souls pass? Is this resurrection? How much is metaphor, how much plain fact? Or is there any longer a difference? Archetypes have actualized in events so exaggerated, so melodramatic and patently symbolic, that no serious novelist, except perhaps in parody, would now attempt to treat them as art.



ONE DIFFERENCE between Nazi and Soviet camps was that in the latter dying was a slower process. There was, though, this exception: during the early years of GULAG, when prisoners were sent into the arctic wastes to construct new slave sites, the ferocity of their ordeal was such, it took so many lives so fast, that later among Soviet inmates it became a sort of legendary standard by which to measure degrees of hardship in different camps. Dumped in the middle of nowhere, men and women had to answer the sky's extremity with, quite literally, nothing but themselves. Here is an "old" prisoner's story of those first days:

We found only unending forests and marshlands—areas upon which no human foot had ever trod before. For us nothing was prepared in advance. We were brought into the woods and told to build barracks and enclosures, to find water, to cut roads. . . . That was how the northern camps came into being. For months on end we slept in holes dug in the ground. We subsisted on a diet of dry rusks made of black bread and, in the summertime, on wild berries. We were unarmed in the struggle against a harsh nature. The biting cold, the strength-sapping labor, disease—these left alive only a few of the original prisoners here. Even among our guards the death rate was catastrophic. . . . I can recall numerous cases of the "white death"—when a prisoner simply remained alone in the snow, not being able to muster the strength to get up (Gliksman, 266).

*That is an image of existence at its limit, a*  
~~This is the archetype of "unaccommodated man," the specific~~  
*case*  
~~image~~ of the worst world possible. From it comes the definition of extremity as a situation in which men and women must live *without accommodation*; and to one degree or another this was true of all the concentration camps. All were places in which the human self was stripped of spiritual as well as physical mediations, until literally nothing was left to persist through pain and time but the body itself.

178 To pass from civilization to extremity means to be shorn of the elaborate system of relationships—to job, class, tradition and family, to groups and institutions of every kind—which for us provides perhaps ninety percent of what we think we are. In the camps prisoners lost their possessions, their social identity, the whole of the cultural matrix which had previously sustained them. They lost, in other words, the delicate web of symbolic identifications available to men and women in normal times. In Nazi camps they lost even their names and their hair. They were reduced to immediate physical existence through a process of de-sublimation so abrupt and thorough that—in the plainest, starkest sense—nothing remained of what the self had been:

You lost the capability of proving to yourself, in a moment of doubt, that you are still the same human being you were when you came here. That being is gone, and only a miserably wretched creature remains in her place. A naked creature deprived of everything and avidly covering her body with someone else's sweat-saturated garments in spite of keen disgust

(Szmaglewska, 78).

Or as Viktor Frankl discovered after his first hours in Auschwitz:

While we were waiting for the shower, our nakedness was brought home to us: we really had nothing now except our bare bodies—even minus hair; all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence (11).

~~The reduction to nakedness was a first step in the process of dehumanization. It was a first step in the process of dehumanization. It was a first step in the process of dehumanization.~~

In Soviet camps, new prisoners were regularly robbed of vital possessions, especially warm clothing, by the ubiquitous gangs of *urkas* (criminals). In Nazi camps the reduction to nakedness involved a specialized set of procedures. But in either case the outcome was total loss, and the survival struggle therefore began with a search for minimal items of accommodation, clothing or a blanket or the indispensable cup or bowl. Very often—since new prisoners had not yet learned to "organize"—the things they needed could only be got by trading bread. And once inmates did



182 What of the future with the sense of possibility it gives us, the feeling of life unfolding toward fulfillment which supports so much of personal identity and which, in troubled times, nourishes the will to push on? In the concentration camps, of course, there was no future. At very best, tomorrow meant more of the same; ~~what purpose could there be for the future of the camp?~~ Death might be seconds away, and each day was an agony so endless as never to be got through. Under such circumstances, thinking of the future was even more painful than remembering the past:

A day begins like every day, so long as not to allow us reasonably to conceive its end, so much cold, so much hunger, so much exhaustion separates us from it; so that it is better to concentrate one's attention and desires on the block of grey bread, which is small but which will certainly be ours in an hour, and which for five minutes, until we have devoured it, will form everything that the law of the place allows us to possess

(Levi, 57).

That is a constant theme of survivors: to concentrate on this day, this five minutes, this small need or pleasure. They endure from one day to the next, from one hour to another, "on a short-term basis," as one survivor says—which meant, for example, "eating what one was given without laying aside for the future, since no future was certain" (Berkowitz, 126).

As the war neared its end, ~~prisoners~~ in the German camps were aware of the coming liberation. They also knew that general massacres were scheduled (some of which took place); and once the death marches began, deliverance seemed remote indeed. Some part of the will to live *was* rooted in the hope of ultimate release, however unlikely that possibility might seem at any particular time. Many survivors must surely have drawn upon this faint last hope to carry them through those final days. But almost always this kind of hope was covert, like a repressed desire which affects behavior although it remains unconscious. For Soviet prisoners, the chance of release was even more improbable. Too many inmates, on the day their term was up, were sentenced to another ten or twenty years. At the end of the war, rumors of amnesty

were widespread; but here too, the best protection against despair was not to hope:

183 Such exaltation was usually followed by deep depression when the imagined zero hour had passed without incident. If, after such a swing from hope to despair, we did not wish to suffer mental instability . . . we had to develop our own technique for preserving our sense of balance. Many became thorough pessimists because of this (Gollwitzer, 81).

To live by looking ahead, as we do, was not possible in the camps. One Soviet prisoner, after serving his sentence of 3,650 days, was told that instead of release his term had been prolonged "indefinitely." That same day he died, for no visible reason. As one of his surviving comrades said, "I can only guess what was happening in his heart, but one thing is certain—that besides despair, pain, and helpless anger, he felt also regret for his thoughtless faith in hope" (Herling, 33). The chances for survival and freedom were so logically improbable that no hope, as we know hope, could be allowed into consciousness. The despair thus generated would be too much to bear. How, standing through the hours of winter roll-call in Auschwitz, could anyone be said to hope or believe in a future?

It is as if this present moment of existence in camp with the thousands of motionless figures were frozen like the plants at the bottom of a lake, whose surface is covered by a thick layer of ice. And neither your longing eyes nor the efforts of your young arms nor your warmest thoughts can pierce that heavy layer of ice which spreads over your life. No fist, no matter how strong, can crack this barrier with its blow (Szmaglewska, 110).

The temptation to despair was thus compounded by the temptation to hope, in a situation where both were deadly. And as might be expected, April was indeed the cruelest month. The desire to remember, to have one's past self born again, was worst in the spring. ~~And~~ The return of growth and fruitfulness, the whole of life's promise implicit in a blade of new grass, suggested a future that in the survivor's case was mockery. In extremity life



proceeds by rejecting hope, by refusing to consider its own future:

184 If you lack the strength to resist the call of the earth awakened by spring. . . . [you] had better grab up a spade, a wheelbarrow, do any task within the camp and glue your eyes on the faded barracks. Not for one moment let yourself forget that you are in a concentration camp. You will be much less unhappy if you do not experience the dreams, and then face the rude awakenings. . . . In order not to become insane from the wonder of life pulsating all around you in newly awakening nature . . . it is better to bury yourself in the camp, as a rock is embedded and cannot move from its place

(Szmaglewska, 170).

Prisoners in the camps did struggle, did resist, did plan and carry through revolts. But not, again, with hope as we know it. Sanity depended on always expecting the worst, on the realism of doomed men and women still holding out. This, finally, is the attitude survivors take: they might make it, they probably won't, but they will not stop trying.

~~And but even when they thought they had found something, they found only a mirage. Their hope was founded on a mirage. Their capacity to survive was a power as primitive as the hunger of the total organism. It was not hope.~~

Past and future mean little to men and women dying, for whom reality resides in a scrap of string or bread. If survivors thought of things elsewhere, they did it wistfully or with a moment's fierce desire, but without prolonged belief. Everything about the camp experience conspired to reduce them to where they were and what they were—living bodies in a place of death. Gone were the myths and institutions, the symbols and technologies which in normal times allow the self to transcend and lose sight of its actual situation. An apt image of civilization, crude as this may sound, is that of a man sitting on a toilet reading a book. He is there, of course, but in consciousness he is elsewhere. The physical act he performs, and the biological identity it confirms, are

neither visible nor in any sense significant. But for men and women in extremity this same event, minus the book, the privacy and the comfort of a clean toilet bowl, becomes an activity requiring ~~much energy and~~ <sup>tense</sup> attention. Survivors are reduced to primal acts and to an awareness circumscribed by primitive needs. They are naked to the roots, radically compressed to their essence as creatures of flesh.

When in ordinary circumstances we discuss the question of basic needs, the most fundamental of all, the need to excrete, is of course never mentioned. There will always, however, be much talk of two others, which for most of us represent man's "animal" side. Hunger and sex, we say, are ineradicable needs; and with hunger there is no doubt. But with sex the case is less clear, despite the belief that sex is as fundamental as hunger. It isn't. One of the striking things about the concentration camp experience—and there is enormous evidence on this point—is that under conditions of privation and horror the need for sex disappears. It simply is not there, neither in feeling nor in fantasy, neither the desire nor the drive. As one survivor says, "Many of us young men ceased to have any sexual feelings whatever; Karel and I, during all the time we were in Treblinka, and for long afterwards, were men in name only" (Sereny, 237). Or as another puts it, "After two or three weeks of the regime at Maidanek, sex problems disappeared. Women lost their periods; men lost their urge" (Donat, 183). In Buchenwald, according to the report of a doctor imprisoned there, "one hundred per cent of the female prisoners ceased to menstruate at the very beginning of their term of captivity; the function did not reappear until months after their liberation" (Weinstock, 235). And another survivor, this time from Auschwitz, observes that "even in his dreams the prisoner did not seem to concern himself with sex" (Frankl, 31).

The same thing occurred in Soviet camps. As one survivor says: "Oh, how we made fun of ourselves! Someone said that it was a miracle of nature that we had to urinate, . . . otherwise we would forget we had a sex organ" (Gilboa, 236). Another humorous remark, which in time became a camp proverb, was a



one's being, the capacity for erotic fulfillment is ruined. Perhaps too, disappearance of sexual desire in the camps was a biological phenomenon in service of collective survival. For if a state of nature had prevailed, men and women fighting among themselves for sexual privilege, the kind of ~~community~~<sup>community</sup> which grew up among prisoners would have been more difficult and open to betrayal. And it would seem, finally, that the most powerful depressors of sexual need are horror and moral disgust. The station-master at Treblinka, who directed incoming trains (but who was also a secret agent in the Polish underground), reports that once the mass killing started, he and his wife could no longer make love: "Of course there was no question of a normal sexual life; we felt we lived in a cemetery; how could one feel joy there?" (Sereny, 155). Sexual joy is one of life's chief blessings, and the biological drive which enforces it is very strong. Even so, eros begins to govern human behavior only after a critical level of safety and well-being has been attained. If this runs counter to Freud's view—that civilized rather than primitive conditions repress erotic need—so be it. Behavior which does not support day-to-day existence tends to vanish in extremity. We may fairly conclude that what remains is indispensable. ■

187

~~The need for moral unity remained, as did the need to preserve dignity and the need to establish social bonds. But the most immediate and relentless demand, after elementary sanitation, was the need for food—which, in the survivor's case, might better be spoken of as a condition of existence. The survivor's hunger is total—a fanatical yearning for food and a perpetual obsession about it, intensified by intimate knowledge that for lack of nourishment his or her grasp on life grows weaker day by day. Men or women starving can feel life withering. It is amazing that Bruno Bettelheim, a man with first-hand knowledge, can make the following remark:~~

~~Prisoners were obsessed with food and things beyond all reason. To a large degree, this obsession was explained~~

188 by their reverting to infantile attitudes which made them turn to food as the most available and basic symbol of security (233).

But of course food was not a symbol. It was the concrete source of life and nothing less. Certainly it was not available; men and women starved to death by the thousands, and in every case their decline—which is to say their hunger—was *visible*. As one survivor says:

One evening when undressing I happened to look at my thighs. I realized sharply that I had none left. And that is not a figure of speech—the expression “to be nothing but skin and bone” became a truth

(Bernard, 100).

Given these circumstances, how can the obsession with food be interpreted in terms other than those of basic physical need? When people are starving their condition is as plain to each other as to themselves:

All those who have been through this terrible experience of devitalisation through famine have been able to see for themselves the scarcely credible feebleness of the muscles, and I shall be forgiven for mentioning a dreadful detail, which will not astonish them at least—that the abdominal muscles were incapable of expelling matter, which was the principal cause of the terrible constipation from which all the patients suffered, when they did not suffer from the reverse, for exactly the same reason (Bernard, 112).

The standard fare in a Nazi camp was this: for breakfast, hot water with enough dirt in it to be called “coffee”; for lunch, hot water with bits of cabbage, turnip or nettle in it; for dinner, bread and sometimes a piece of sausage or margarine. In the Soviet camps, a full ration of bread and soup was given only to those already strong enough to fulfill the “work norm.” To receive the minimal means of life, prisoners had to work so hard that sooner or later their strength failed, exhaustion overtook them, and then they could not recover since they were no longer meeting the norm and were therefore not “entitled” to adequate

rations. Under these conditions, food mattered more than anything else; hunger was indeed obsessive, but not “beyond all reason.”

189 The significance of food—both in direct experience and as a determinant of behavior and perception—is central to biological being. The quest for food is as old as life on earth, and for two billion years almost all of organic activity has been determined by the need to eat, to gather energy, and only then to expand in complexity and number. Within the last hundred million years, furthermore, the development of food-gathering—migration, territorial defense, hunting and finally agriculture—has been the evolutionary basis of behavior truly social. The getting, sharing and consuming of food, in other words, has been crucial to the emergence of man as man. War and peace have been functions of food, and the rise of civilization in the Levant and therefore in the West could not have occurred without bread; for only when the cultivation of wheat replaced tribal wandering could populations stabilize enough to create cities. And central to the meaning of food in perception is not only the fact that it keeps us alive, but also that like sex, sleep, and other primal activities, eating yields a special pleasure, elemental and intrinsic to the act itself, which life long ago invested in the doing of those acts which satisfy its basic needs.

In extremity, to say that food *is* life is not a metaphor. Furthermore, eating was often the sole pleasure available to camp prisoners. Amid the luxury of our lives we perhaps forget that without some small dependable delight, existence gradually becomes unbearable. This does not imply “infantile regression” but rather the need to affirm life, to find it good, to connect in some way which offsets, if only for minutes, suffering which might otherwise be as seamless and inescapable as Hell. Solzhenitsyn likes to stress that for starving men the moment of soup and bread can be intense to a mystical degree. And perhaps it is, if by “mystical” we mean an affirmation inherent in existence itself. In extremity, as the following statement suggests—from the report of a woman who survived Neubrandenburg—food and the pleasure of eating



become grounds upon which joy and affirmation remain, if not actual, then at least firmly possible:

190

Anything edible obsessed us more and more. We were furious at ourselves for having left food on our plates ten years before that could still have been eaten, or for having thrown a scrap of bread or cake away. I had odious memories of the time I had wanted to lose weight. . . . Oh, if we were to go back now, I would know how to live. I wouldn't be stupidly sad. I wouldn't let a single moment be spoiled by the sorrows of love or by metaphysical anxieties. I know now what I would do: I would live (Maurel, 97). ■

~~In survival situations, physical need generates a large pattern of behavior, motivated by the need itself, that which works finally to support and keep human selfhood intact.~~ Survivors act as they do because they have to; and what their predicament reveals is that in extremity life and humanness depend on the same set of activities. This amounts to saying that when external props collapse, survivors fall back on life itself. A survivor of Treblinka speaks for all those like himself when he says:

I have read more or less everything that has been written about this subject. But somehow no one appears to have understood: it wasn't *ruthlessness* that enabled an individual to survive—it was an intangible quality, not particular to educated or sophisticated individuals. Anyone might have it. It is perhaps best described as an overriding thirst—perhaps, too, a *talent* for life, and a faith in life (Sereny, 183).

He is referring to something which enables men and women to act spontaneously and correctly during times of protracted stress and danger. There is no evidence—nor should the above statement be construed—to suggest that this ~~capacity~~ <sup>capacity</sup> is exclusive to a particular class, race, culture or nation. The survivor just quoted is describing how it felt to him *as experienced*; and for the phrase "talent for life" we might substitute "magic will" or "imperishable power" or "life itself" or any of

the other phrases survivors use. The reference is always to an agency felt to be other and greater than the personal ego, a reservoir of strength and resources which in extremity become active and are felt as the deeper foundation of selfhood. This is as much as survivors can say of their experience, but in coming to this limit we touch upon a further implication—a view reached precisely at the limit of personal experience. Survivors act as if they were *prepared* for extremity; as if anterior to learning and acculturation there were a deeper knowledge, an elder wisdom, a substratum of vital information biologically instilled and biologically effective.

We may at least speculate that through long periods of extremity, survival literally depends on life itself—life, that is, as the biologists see it, not as a state or condition but as a set of activities evolved through time ~~an~~ <sup>in</sup> successful response to crisis, the sole purpose of which is to keep going. ~~From this point of view, the survivor's "talent for life" is a capacity possessed by all surviving life forms, acquired through the millions of years of evolutionary struggle which gave birth finally to man.~~ Life continues, defends itself, expands. It does this by answering environmental challenges with countless behavioral patterns designed to deal with disturbance and threat. Behavior which proves successful for any particular species *over the long run* enters its genotype and becomes "innate." To be sure, this happens by chance, with many failures, and through unimaginably long ages of time. From phylum to phylum, furthermore, the elements of such patterns differ greatly, but each will possess some fixed response to crisis, some settled way of meeting major needs, including those of defense and repair. Survival, in this case, depends on a basic fund of "biological wisdom," to use C. H. Waddington's phrase, with which all living creatures are endowed. Stripped of everything but life, what can the survivor fall back upon except some biologically determined "talent" long suppressed by cultural deformation, a bank of knowledge embedded in the body's cells, ~~but which remains and may be relied upon in extremity.~~ The key to survival behavior <sup>may</sup> thus lie <sup>may</sup> in the priority of biological being—which is to say that the properties of life itself <sup>must</sup> ~~best~~ account

191



192 for the rather surprising fact that under dehumanizing pressure men and women tend to preserve themselves in ways recognizably human.

To suggest that the survivor's behavior is biologically determined is to assume a number of principles which, from the perspective of the biological sciences, <sup>can</sup> be considered "facts of life." The first is that almost all behavior in the individual as in the society directly or indirectly serves the general cause of survival. The second is that any particular pattern of behavior is the outcome of millions of years of trial-and-error experience which, once it has crystallized, passes from generation to generation through genetic transmission. The third, which follows from the first two, is that primary forms of behavior are innate, the ingrained inheritance of all life-experience in a particular line of descent. The fourth is that these facts apply as much to man as to other life-forms. The whole of this view is summed up in two broad statements by J. Z. Young: "the capacity to continue is precisely the central characteristic of life" (108); and "the characteristics of human life are the activities by which human continuity is maintained" (8).

There is no question of "vitalism" here, no transcendental life-force or *élan vital* in Bergson's sense. And there is no question of "teleology" either; no grand design, no pre-established harmony tuning up at our expense as Teilhard de Chardin, for example, would have liked us to think. Life has no purpose beyond itself; or rather, having arisen by chance in an alien universe, life is its own ground and purpose, and the entire aim of its vast activity is nothing more than to establish stable systems and endure. There is nothing especially mysterious about this, although the *feeling* of life—existence experienced subjectively—bears mystical significance and power. Life goes forward through the collision of populations with environments; how fast or slow this happens depends on the interaction of genetic potential and natural selection, "the outcome," as E. O. Wilson puts it, "of the genetic response of populations to ecological pressure" (32).

For any particular life-form, this much is certain: it is what it is, and behaves as it does, as the result of the whole of its past.

"Everything comes from experience," says Jacques Monod,

~~not from ongoing, current experience reinforced by each individual with each new generation, but from the experience accumulated by the entire mass of the species over the course of its evolution.~~

Every living being is *also* a fossil. Within it, all the way down to the microscopic structure of its proteins, it bears the traces if not the stigmata of its ancestry. This is yet truer of man than of any other animal species by dint of the dual evolution—physical and ideational—that he is heir to (154, 160).

Man's immediate past goes back two million years. The line of hominid descent goes back fifteen to twenty million years. And in the deepest sense, man's inheritance goes back to the appearance of life on earth, some two billion years ago; time enough to acquire the ground-sense necessary to survive in proven ways. And whether we call the configuration of man's biologically determined behavior his "biogram," as Earl W. Count has suggested, or his "biological infrastructure," as Lionel Tiger argues, the basic point is clear: survival behavior reveals a fixed system of activity, biological in origin, which is specific to humanness as such.

It would be strange indeed, with so many millions of years of survival-experience packed into our genes, if at some deep involuntary level we did not possess capacities specially geared to cope with extreme situations. In the beginning there was nothing but extremity, nothing but the random rush of life in a touch-and-go struggle against extinction. Against the constant threat of oblivion, tendencies had to be developed which would increase the capacity to continue. The process of evolution is thus a perpetual gathering of information, on levels ever more complex, <sup>which works</sup> ~~to~~ to preserve existence not only under normal conditions (which means conditions already adjusted to), but especially in time of disaster. Part of the uniqueness of man is that in addition to normal adjustment, he seems adjusted to *possible* dangers, to threat as a potential condition. At least in its essentials, human behavior may be understood as "a repertoire of possible reactions"



and this distinction, as E. O. Wilson points out, is crucial to further understanding of man as a biological creature:

One of the key questions, never far from the thinking of anthropologists and biologists who pursue real theory, is to what extent the biogram represents an adaptation to modern cultural life and to what extent it is a phylogenetic vestige. Our civilizations were jerrybuilt around the biogram. How have they been influenced by it? Conversely, how much flexibility is there in the biogram, and in which parameters particularly? Experience with other animals indicates that when organs are hypertrophied, phylogeny is hard to reconstruct. This is the crux of the problem of the evolutionary analysis of human behavior (548).

195

The problem with man is that his evolution involved a series of "quantum jumps" which radically transformed the use and quality of inherited traits. The relation of human behavior to its own phylogenetic past and to that of other species is therefore unclear. But on one point biologists agree: man is the culmination of a tendency toward social organization which appears everywhere in the biosphere. Certainly there were societies before there were men. The cell itself is a kind of social organization, and any two-cell animal is in fact two animals who long ago worked out a system of mutual support. Primates likewise solved the problem of survival, millions of years before the appearance of the hominid line, by evolving social orders which include systems of communication and hierarchy, of mating and care for the young, of food-gathering, territory and defense. The typical primate social group, as Hans Kummer observes, is "an ever-present tool of survival" (36). Man emerged from these prior achievements, and thus Konrad Lorenz argues:

If it were not for a rich endowment of social instincts, man could never have risen above the animal world. All specifically human faculties, the power of speech, cultural tradition, moral responsibility, could have evolved only in a being which, before the very dawn of conceptual thinking, lived in well-organized communities (246).

nomena because it defies entropy. While everything else in the universe is "running down," life is "running up." In some sense this is true of the human self also. It too defies entropy and resists dispersal; it too spends much energy and anguish keeping itself tightly whole—a kind of moral effort we ordinarily refer to as "maintaining integrity"—and works to adjust without losing the continuity of its basic organization. The comparison I am making is pure speculation, of course; it could hardly be otherwise. And yet how apt, in the survivor's case, to take seriously the idea that mankind is life conscious of itself; as if basic biological processes, transformed by consciousness, do indeed reappear as activities specific to human selfhood. 201

~~One of the oldest disputes in biology is whether evolution occurs at the individual or at the species level. E. O. Wilson argues convincingly that it occurs at both levels, the result is a dilemma and as this predicament reflects itself in human beings,~~

~~the individual is forced to make impossible choices between "rights" and "duties" of self and those of family, tribe, and other units of selection, each of which evolves its own code of honor (19).~~

~~Which is to say, what everyone knows, that at the base of selfhood lies contradiction.~~ Human beings need and desire to be part of a larger whole, to join with their fellows and even, in moments of great passion, to lose the sense of self entirely. That is the basis of sex and religion, of politics and society. But just as much, men and women yearn for solitude, they struggle fiercely for an existence apart, for an integrity absolutely unbreachable. That is the basis of dignity, of personality, of the egotism which fuels creation and discovery, and finally of the sense of individual "rights." But throughout the whole of the biosphere a similar duality is evident. From polymers to man, life-forms are perpetually merging, joining, establishing symbiotic and societal modes of relation for mutual benefit. At the same time, however, particular life-forms are differentiating themselves from others, indi-