

Quotes from an Auschwitz survivor's essay on life in the camp

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A still from a Soviet film documenting the liberation of Auschwitz. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Today is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day — a day on which it's worth taking some time to actually understand what happened during the Nazi slaughter. One of the best ways to do that is to revisit the writing of Primo Levi, a Jewish-Italian Auschwitz survivor and one of the camp's greatest and most insightful literary documentarians.

Of Levi's work, his essay "The Gray Zone" — from *The Drowned and the Saved*, his final book before his 1987 suicide — really stands out. It's remarkable both for its unforgettable depiction of the routine brutality of life in Auschwitz and for its penetrating psychological analysis of the camp's inner workings. Here are nine of the most insightful, terrifying, and powerful quotes from Levi's essay — ones that best exemplify the core of the piece.

1) Here's how Levi describes the experience of entering the camp:

Kicks and punches right away, often in the face; an orgy of orders screamed with true and simulated rage; complete nakedness after being stripped; the shaving off of all one's hair; the outfitting in rags.

2) For Levi, this spoke to an underlying purpose of the camps:

Remember that the concentration camp system even from its origins (which coincide with the rise to power of Nazism in Germany), had as its primary purpose shattering the adversaries' capacity to resist: for the camp management, the new arrival was by definition an adversary, whatever the label attached to him might be, and he must immediately be demolished to make sure that he did not become an example or a germ of organized resistance.

3) The camps didn't just break prisoners' will in order to prevent rebellion. They did so, Levi believes, as yet another form of cruel punishment for the crime of existing:

It is naïve, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims: On the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them resemble itself, and this all the more when they are available, blank, and lacking a political and moral armature.

4) No group better exemplified the way camps degraded their victims than the Sonderkommando (Special Squad). These overwhelmingly Jewish prisoners were given enough to eat for some time, but their task was horrible:

With the duly vague definition, "Special Squad," the SS referred to the group of prisoners entrusted with running the crematoria. It was their task to maintain order among the new arrivals (often completely unaware of the destiny awaiting them) who were to be sent into the gas chambers, to extract the corpses from the chambers, to pull gold teeth from jaws, to cut women's hair, to sort and classify clothes, shoes, and the content of the luggage, to transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens, to extract and eliminate the ashes. The Special Squad in Auschwitz numbered, depending on the moment, from seven hundred to one thousand active members.

These Special Squads did not escape everyone else's fate. On the contrary, the SS exerted the greatest diligence to prevent any man who had been part of it from surviving and telling. Twelve squads succeeded each other for a few months, whereupon it was suppressed, each time with a different trick to head off possible resistance. As its initiation, the next squad burnt the corpses of its predecessors.



Eyeglasses, clothing, footwear and other personal effects taken from the prisoners before they were taken to the gas chamber, were found after the liberation piled up in the six remaining warehouses at the camp. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Philip Vock)

5) Why assign Jews these tasks? For Levi, the answers have to do with the design of the camps itself.

Conceiving and organizing the squads was National Socialism's most demonic crime. Behind the pragmatic aspect (to economize on able men, to impose on other others the most atrocious tasks)...the institution represented an attempt to shift onto others — specifically, the victims — the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.

6) Levi recalls a soccer game between the Special Squad and their SS guards:

Nothing of this kind ever took place, nor would it have been conceivable, with other categories of prisoners; but with them, with the "crematorium ravens," the SS could enter the field on an equal footing, or almost. Behind this armistice one hears satanic laughter: it is consummated, we have succeeded, you no longer are the other race, the anti-race, the prime enemy of the millennial Reich; you are no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother. Come, we can play together.

7) Levi's intent is not to place the camp's inmates and guards on the same moral plane, or even to judge the Special Squad members thrown into an awful situation:

I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators or truth.

"Survivor," a portrait of Primo Levi by Jewish artist Larry Rivers. The painting superimposes the image of another survivor on Levi's forehead. (Santi Visalli/Getty Images)

8) Instead, Levi is attempting to explain how systems of domination corrupt even their victims — and to remind people to challenge them:

The ascent of the privileged, not only in the Lager but in all human coexistence, is an anguishing but unfailing phenomenon: only in utopias is it absent. It is the duty of righteous men to make war on all undeserved privilege, but one must not forget that this is a war without end. Where power is exercised by few or only one against the many, privilege is born and proliferates, even against the will of power itself.

9) The essay concludes with a stark reminder that while Nazism has been defeated, the psychological forces that enabled its rise are universal:

We too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility. Willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all inside the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death, and close by the train is waiting.

