
In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they would not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.

We know that we will have difficulty in being understood, and this is as it should be. But consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions which even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; nor is it conceivable that we can be deprived of them in our world, for we immediately find others to substitute for the old ones, other objects which are ours in their personification and evocation of our memories.

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgment of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term “extermination camp,” and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: “to lie on the bottom.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Primo Levi (1919-1987) was an Italian Jewish chemist and writer. In 1943 he was arrested for being a partisan in the Italian resistance and was deported to Auschwitz. He managed to survive there for a full year (of the 650 Jews in his convoy, only about 20 would return). After liberation, Levi's desire to bear witness led him to write many important memoirs, poems, and short stories about his experiences. In *Survival in Auschwitz* (published elsewhere as *If This is a Man*), Levi recounts the inhumanity of life as a prisoner. In the excerpt above, Levi reflects on his experience of the intake process at Auschwitz – being stripped, shaved, disinfected, and tattooed – and being turned against his will into a slave laborer.

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