



Primo Michele Levi (1919-1987)

ANDREW ROBERTS, THE STORM OF WAR, 2009

For those who survived the initial *Selektion* on the railway siding – known as the Ramp – there were plenty more. Regular barrack inspections would take place to ascertain whether prisoners still had the strength to work effectively, and those who could not, according to the most arbitrary criteria, were gassed. *Selektion* also took place in the prison hospital where SS doctors would regularly cull the ‘hopelessly ill’ patients. The historian Gideon Grei[f] has identified seven areas of camp life where the absolutely pitiless phenomenon of *Selektion* regularly operated, against which there was no appeal.¹ *Selektion* officers would carry canes, which could be used as weapons but were more often used to direct inmates without having to come into physical contact with them. ‘All those able to find a way out, try to take it’, recalled Primo Levi of the process, ‘but they are in the minority because it is very difficult to escape from a selection. The Germans apply themselves to these things with great skill and diligence.’² Driven by thirst one day, Levi – *Häftling* (prisoner) number 174517 – opened the window of his hut to break off an icicle to drink, but a guard snatched it away. ‘Why?’ Levi asked, only to receive the reply, ‘Hier ist kein warum’ (Here, there is no why).³ Yet in a sense there was; the SS did not want Levi to drink water because they did not want strong inmates, but rather weak, preferably dying ones as the numbers ‘selected’ could always be immediately replenished. Hearing a fellow

¹ Gideon Greif, *We Wept without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz*, 2005, p. 109.

² Primo Levi, *If this Is a Man*, 1987, p. 131.

³ Levi, *If this Is a Man*, p. [1]35.

prisoner thanking God that he was not selected, Levi recollected thinking: 'Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again? If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer.'⁴

[...]

The human nature of even the most noble people was warped in the struggle for existence. 'Only those prisoners could keep alive who ...had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft, and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves,' recalled [Viktor] Frankl. 'The best of us did not return.'⁵ Primo Levi, who somehow survived Auschwitz, likewise explained why it was useless to befriend the weak there, because 'one knows they are only here on a visit, that in a few weeks nothing will remain of them but a handful of ashes in some nearby field and a crossed-out name on a register.'⁶

[...]

Anything approaching human dignity was next to impossible to retain; as Frankl recalled:

It was a favourite practice to detail a new arrival to a work group whose job it was to clean the latrines and remove the sewage. If, as

⁴ Levi, *If this Is a Man*, p. 136.

⁵ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 2004, p. 19.

⁶ Levi, *If this Is a Man*, p. 95.

usually happened, some of the excrement splashed into his face during its transport over bumpy fields, any sign of disgust by the prisoner or any attempt to wipe off the filth would only be punished by a blow from the *capo*. And thus the mortification of normal relations was hastened.⁷

It was because of experiences like this that another survivor, Elie Wiesel, later a Nobel laureate, was to say in 1983: 'Auschwitz defies perceptions and imaginations, it submits only to memory. Between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent can comprehend.'⁸

(Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War*, London: Allen Lane, 2009, pp. 234-35, 237-38.)

⁷ Frankl, *Man's Search...*, p. 33.

⁸ Greif, *We Wept...*, p. vii.