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The Issue of Survival and the Human Condition in Primo Levi's Survival in Auschwitz as Interpreted through the Oxford English Dictionary

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ABSTRACT

In the field of philology, one of the four methods of exploring a language is the study and application of vocabulary in literature over a period of time. The application and meaning of words in the study of genocide is today more important than ever considering the events that have recently occurred globally. The publisher of the Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, describes it as “the most comprehensive dictionary of the English language.” The publisher states that “The Dictionary is intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, its content should be viewed as an objective reflection of English language usage, not a subjective collection of usage ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts.’ However, it does include information on which usages are, or have been, popularly regarded as ‘incorrect.’ The Dictionary aims to cover the full spectrum of English language usage, from formal to slang, as it has evolved over time.” The goal of this essay is to demonstrate how a work of literature can be interpreted through definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) in relationship to genocide. Other examples of using the OED to interpret literature can be found in such traditional venues such as the work of Jane Austin to modern venues of communication such as Face Time, email, and texting.

Keywords: [Oxford English Dictionary](#).

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Survival in Auschwitz details one man’s experience in the concentration camp at Auschwitz from the winter of 1944 to January 1945, when Auschwitz was liberated by the Soviet Army. Primo Levi’s book discusses the horrors of the camp as well as the sociological make-up of its inmate population, their caste systems, and the various ethnic groups and the way these groups interact with one another. At the same time, it explores the biases and prejudices of these groups and how while suffering the most inhumane conditions ever inflicted upon the human race, they still have conflicts with one another.

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines survival as “The state of fact of continuing to live after some event (*spec.* of the soul after death); remaining alive, living on.” Survival is also defined as “Continuance after the end or cessation of something else, or after some event; *spec.* continuance of a custom, observance, etc. after the circumstances or conditions in which it originated or which gave significance to it have passed away,” and as “Something that continues to exist after the cessation of something else, or of other things of the kind; a surviving remnant; *spec.* applied to a surviving custom, observance, belief, etc. Also, used *spec.* in *Cultural Anthropol.* With ref. to a theory that from such surviving customs and observances the earlier stages in the evolution of a culture can be reconstructed.” Each of these applications applies in Levi’s book.

In the beginning of Levi’s account, he describes the “the metamorphosis” that all of the individuals who were hustled off the trains cars knew they would experience collectively when he states that they realized “tomorrow we will be like them,” referring to the camp workers who worked alongside the guards on the train platform. This realization that one had to adapt quickly was crucial to survival.

After the traumatic events of being processed into the camp, Levi realizes that to survive he must live in the present and not dwell on the past or wonder about the future. Like the other new prisoners in the camp, Levi experiences for the first time in his life the pangs of true hunger, which signals his primal realization of the minimal need for subsistence to survive. Adult humans eat for pleasure, sustainability, and to socialize. Like animals, the prisoners of the camp feed to survive, nothing more, nothing less.

Another attempt at survival (socialization) quickly fails when Levi begins to meet fellow Italians on Sundays. At each meeting, fewer show up, and their physical states are depressing. Levi stops meeting with them because it is too emotionally and physiologically draining. The walk to meet his fellow Italian prisoners in the corner of the concentration camp burns precious calories, which are crucial for survival. For the prisoners, another form of survival is washing. Washing not only eliminates dirt and disease but also is a subtle form of rebellion, the refusal to consent. As defined within the OED washing is “...applied to a surviving custom, observance, belief.”

Levi’s injuries from the harsh work conditions at Auschwitz cause him to be sent to the KA-BE (hospital) and actually save him emotionally for the trials that he will face in the near future. In the hospital, he has open discussions with other prisoners about their purpose and meets prisoners who share their survival knowledge with him, knowledge that he passes on to others in the future. Most importantly, Levi has an opportunity to recollect thoughts of his past and wonders whether if he physically survives the horrors of Auschwitz, he will survive emotionally. At KA-BE, Levi’s attempts to survive match the OED definition that refers to, “*Cultural Anthropol.* with ref. to a theory that from such surviving customs and observances the earlier stages in the evolution of a culture can be reconstructed.”

In the chapter “The Work,” Levi describes meeting a Pole who has lived in Paris much of his life and speaks fluent French. They share stories that Levi, however, quickly forgets. The significance of this psychological action becomes apparent in the following chapter, “A Good Day,” which demonstrates that a key element of survival is to forget traumatic thoughts. While Levi accomplishes this, his physical pain of hunger prevents him from forgetting that hunger. As Levi emphasizes “..if it were not for the hunger!!” This type of survival is defined in the OED as “Something that continues to exist after the cessation of something else,” while the mind may not survive, the body will continue to fight for survival.”

Significance is placed on prisoner badge color and design, which designated the aristocracy, the criminals, the political prisoners, the homosexuals, and the Jews. Each of these groups had its own hierarchy and rules. In the chapter “The Side of Good and Evil,” Levi indirectly describes the trade of goods within the concentration camp among various groups of prisoners. Yet, Levi does not judge their actions. At the conclusion of the chapter, he invites the reader to judge “good” and “evil” based on the examples of survival, and he challenges us to contemplate how much of the “ordinary world” could survive within the confines of the camps. This statement made me ponder the examples of genocide in

other regions of the world and those who survived it and what they did to survive it: The Boers in South Africa during the 19th century, the Armenians in the first decades of the 20th century, and later the Cambodian civilians by the Khmer Rouge, the Bosnian Muslims by the Serbs, and Tutsis in Rwanda, and today ethnic groups in Sudan, Congo, and Russia. This type of survival could be defined in the OED as "Continuance after the end or cessation of something else." I would define "something else" as Genocide, the deliberate act of eradicating a specific group of individuals.

In the chapter "The Drowned and the Saved," Levi looks at class and power within the camp. Defining the doctors, cooks, and those with skills at the top of the order and those high numbers tattooed on their arms, German language titles are given to those in position of power among the prisoners. Levi describes power as the ability to "gather solidarity" of the masses and to have the power of life and death over other prisoners. In order to survive, Levi wrangles his way into a chemical maintenance unit to achieve a high station within the social order of the camp and more favorable working conditions. As Levi explains his qualifications for the chemical unit (an undergraduate degree in Chemistry from the University in Turin), his mind opens and flood his reconstructed memory with thoughts of art, literature, love, and family. These memories are again a cultural form of survival as defined by the OED, "*Cultural Anthropol.* with ref. to a theory that from such surviving customs and observances the earlier stages in the evolution of a culture can be reconstructed."

The urgency of all forms of survival are related in the concluding chapters of the book up until the day the camp is liberated by Soviet troops; however, the question of the true form of survival is not answered until the last lines of the book, when Levi mentions reunions some months after the liberation of the camp by the Soviets. He doesn't dwell on horrors of his survival experiences in the camp, but rather he relishes and celebrates the lives of those who survived the horrors with him. Again, we look to the OED to define a type of survival, "Something that continues to exist after the cessation of something else." Levi has survived physically and mentally. He continues his professional life as a chemist, yet he writes so that we learn of past events and that we work to suppress similar events. By exploring the descriptive definitions of the primary of Levi's book, one is able to truly interpret the meaning of this work, that man must learn to cope with different survival mechanisms and at the same time learn that one must be aware of the inhumanity of man and the ability of that inhumanity to repeat itself in history.

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