

# **“Invalidated Absolutes and the Reality of Man”**

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On the surface, the Holocaust looked and felt radically different from the world outside the barbed wire. Jews and political prisoners were not just taken from one train station to another, but they were transported into a new, confusing, and immoral world. Moral laws, if applied, proved to be destructive to an individual in the concentration camps. In order to survive in this dirty, scarce, and polluted place, it had to be man against man. Such a world was and still is seemingly indescribable in terms of both man and God. So different was it from the reality once known to man that truth of the past became virtually negligible. What Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Tadeusz Borowski considered “truth” before the Holocaust became a lie in the concentration camps. Yet, man gave birth to this seemingly indescribable new world, which means some human explanation must exist beneath the surface. Wiesel, Levi, and Borowski’s camp experiences make them question the existence of absolute truth through the relativity of personal truths and the inadequacy of language and memory, yet the camps also make them recognize a harsh, Machiavellian truth about men’s tendencies to exploit other men; what keeps them going through all this is hope, even if it proves false.

Wiesel, Levi, and Borowski have difficulty applying their previous beliefs in the camps where morals no longer pertain and survival trumps all else, which results in a deterioration of identity and humanity. Their prior truths, which are considered “absolute” to them because those truths define their lives and mentality, are put into question. If their truths from the outside world cannot be applied in the camps, then they are not absolute. When the values of self must change from one condition to the next, those values are therefore conditional not universal. Wiesel struggles with his faith in a just God; Levi, the Cartesian, is reduced to a thoughtless shadow of himself; and Borowski, who previously believes in the goodness of humanity, realizes man’s

own destructive nature makes everyone guilty of evil. Each author has key moments of doubt and struggle that result in the distortion of personal truths and identity.

Wiesel's identity begins in God. He dedicates his early life to studying God's word, and he considers it truth. He prays, worships, and believes in a divine master of justice. When he just reaches Auschwitz, however, that faith, his "truth," shatters. "The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent" (*Night* 33), Wiesel declares. He watches as everyone else calls out in prayer to a God who does not answer. In the span of one day in the camp, years of belief are tarnished: "Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever...[nor] those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes" (*Night* 34), Wiesel laments. Once believed to be just, righteous, and loving, Wiesel's God is now unresponsive while the flames of the crematoria blacken the sky and his soul. When this prior truth, that a great and just God existed, becomes a lie within the confines of the camp, Wiesel protests against Him who once defined his identity. While others fast on Yom Kippur for this God, Wiesel eats his soup. When others mutter prayers of thanksgiving, he remains silent on the outside while defiant, incredulous thoughts boil beneath the surface. Wiesel's acts become a rebellion against the God who was a large part of his early life, yet they also cause him to feel as if a great void is closing in on him as his soul separates from God (Wiesel, *Night* 69). When he loses his faith in the belief that defined his life, he also loses a large part of his identity. Once personal truths are crushed, he who believes in them is crippled and loses part of himself. Wiesel describes, "I too had become a different person. The student of Talmud, the child I was had been consumed by the flames...My soul had been invaded—and devoured—by a black flame" (*Night* 37). When the truths at the very core of his identity are falsified in the strange world of the camp, his soul dies, too. He is no longer the man he once was. Wiesel, the last surviving child of his

father, doesn't react when his father is struck (*Night* 39, 54) due to the instinct of self-preservation. Survival is his new "God;" the desire for food trumps everything else. As his beliefs are dismembered, his identity debases further and further toward primitive instincts, making him feel less and less human.

Levi, though his initial beliefs are radically different than Wiesel's, also faces this loss of truth and identity in an environment in which thought is restricted, even dangerous. Questioning, thinking, and understanding are part of his Cartesian mantra "I think, therefore I am." He thinks a man's greatest value comes from his ability to think critically, but the Holocaust causes this higher-level thinking to be a death sentence. Those who think anything other than the immediate need for bread and survival get killed. Those who try to understand go mad. It is safer not to think. The Holocaust takes his lifestyle away from him, and therefore the fundamentals of his identity. In the camps, his liberty to think, which is what makes Levi feel human, is stripped away. In one of his first camp experiences, he tries to sate his thirst with an icicle but a guard flings it from Levi's hand. Levi wonders aloud why he took it away, but the guard responds, "There is no why here" (*Survival* 29). In addition, Levi's comrade, Clausner, has carved these words on the bottom of his bowl: "Do not try to understand" (*Survival* 103). The camp restricts Levi's ability to get an answer, but of even greater significance is the fact that he is not allowed to question. This reduces him to a being that must numbly succumb to the events that happen, and to accept them as they are. What he is forced to do in the camps, such as washing a dirty floor with dirty rags and "exhibiting oneself naked," are meaningless tasks that he must do regardless of the "why" (Levi, *The Drowned* 134-135). There exists no string of logic in the application of these menial tasks. The camp degrades him to something less than a man because it inhibits man's most important asset, his mind.

Borowski's view on humanity changes drastically throughout his fictional account. During a significant portion of the book, he expresses the idea that mankind is good, or at least that man can turn from its own evil and make things right. These personal beliefs are mirrored in the characters he creates to explain the Holocaust. Borowski's narrators go from having hope in a better world, one in which man will right the wrongs it has created for itself, to hopeless despair. "Despite the madness of war, we lived for a world that would be different. For a better world...perhaps even our being here is a step towards that world" (121), Borowski writes. It is interesting that this hopeful thought arises in the midst of a concentration camp, and that it suggests humanity can rise out of its manufactured darkness to create a better world from the carcasses of thousands of people. Though mankind shows its bleakest side in the Holocaust, Borowski's narrator goes as far as to claim that there is a greater purpose to the camps and that something good may come from them. Yet, at the end, after he has left the confines of the barbed wire, Borowski discovers that hope, one of the most powerful, motivating human emotions, threatens lives when used in a camp setting. He realizes his hope for a better world and the goodness of humanity is delusive and destructive to new truths of mankind. In the book's final page, he declares his reason for writing the story: "I intend to write a great, immortal epic, worthy of this unchanging, difficult world chiseled out of stone" (Borowski 180). It seems as though he has finally recognized the futility of hoping for that better world. When he says the current world is "unchanging...[and] chiseled out of stone" (Borowski 180), he means that no changes can or will be made; no goodness will come out of the evil world in which he currently resides. Borowski's loss of identity comes from this new idea that mankind is evil, and this is evidenced by the way he places himself in the book as a character. Borowski, who in reality is a political prisoner in the camp, fictionalizes his experience and creates for himself a privileged

Canada Kommando character that he gives his own name. Giving this character his nickname, “Tadek,” suggests that Borowski identifies with him, and since Borowski shows that Tadek is not an innocent victim in the camp, Borowski may be trying to show the readers that he shares the guilt of this character. He explains, “We are not evoking evil irresponsibly or in vain, for we have now become a part of it” (Borowski 113). He’s saying that he’s not an innocent victim, but that there is blood on his hands, too. No man is devoid of guilt, and all men are part of the evil.

Although beliefs held before the Holocaust are put into question, it is interesting to note that Wiesel and Levi still retain slight hope that there is some validity and resilience to their previous truths in the camps. Even though Wiesel thinks God is dormant and unresponsive, he does not share the opinion of some that God is dead. He does not go from believing in God to disbelieving in him altogether. During a public hanging of a child in the center of the camp, a man remarks that God is “hanging here from this gallows” (*Night* 65) next to the child, but Wiesel still believes God exists, that He’s alive. He claims, “I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice” (*Night* 45). Wiesel stops praying and fasting in protest of God’s actions, or rather lack thereof, but the camp does not prove to him that God isn’t real. In this way, Wiesel retains some sliver of hope that his previous belief holds true to a certain extent: a divine being exists, even if His lack of justice is unexpected. In the same way, though Levi cannot think most of the time because his energy needs to be spent on basic survival needs and the constant possibility of imminent death, opportunities for him to regain the ability to think do arise. Though at other times it seems as if thought is life-threatening or even impossible in the setting of a Nazi camp, these moments prove that thought is possible, and that it can uphold its constructive nature in such an environment. In those instants, Levi feels like he regenerates a part of his identity and therefore his humanity. During his interview for one of the

chemist positions in the camp, Levi gains the ability to remember past events and think like he used to in college. “This sense of lucid elation...I recognize it...that spontaneous mobilization of all my logical faculties and all my knowledge” (*Survival* 106) is revitalized, Levi thinks happily. His awe of thought is evident in this passage, through his use of words such as “elation” and “spontaneous.” Thought is a lightning-quick response that holds so much value and joy. Rather than diminishing his own ability to survive in the camps, it instead gives him strength in that moment though the moment is fleeting. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi says that moments of thinking, referring specifically to when he describes the Divine Comedy to Pikolo, “made it possible for me to reestablish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and reinforcing my identity” (139).

One of the major questions the authors ask is if people will understand or believe what happened in the Holocaust. A great barrier to this understanding, they claim, is inadequate language, which is significant because language is supposed to communicate the truth. The current words are not harsh or powerful enough to convey what really happened and how the victims truly felt as the Nazis persecuted and tortured them. If language is insufficient to describe the realities of the camps and just how the victims felt, then how can the truth of the matter be properly transmitted? The idea that the truth of the Holocaust will be lost in translation points out the inaccuracy of language in providing an unyielding truth. The message the authors manage to get across is missing pieces, and partial truth is not absolute. The word “genocide” had to be created in order to explain the Holocaust, yet words for extreme hunger, thirst, and terror remained static and were insufficient in their depiction of what the victims experienced. The word “Auschwitz,” which initially had no meaning to Wiesel (*Night* 27) or Levi (*Survival* 17), came to describe the horrendous death camp that served to kill what was left of a man not once,

but twice. How can Auschwitz be described? The authors can list off pitifully inaccurate words such as gas chamber, mud, hunger, work, tired, and inhumane, but these words had been previously created in regards to situations profoundly dissimilar to the Holocaust. Wiesel says, “The Holocaust defies reference, analogy” (*Death of My Father*). No event in history can compare, not even closely. “Genocide” had to be coined because no other war had the intent to completely eradicate the Jews and their culture. Thus, these words that remained that were used to describe past events, created in respect to emotions and sensations experienced in better circumstances, do not do justice to what was seen and felt in the camps. Levi says, “If the Lager had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing” (*Survival* 123). Levi explicitly states how inaccurate the current language is to convey the truth of how he feels. Not only does this apply to feeling “cold,” but it also applies to significant events. If feelings cannot be adequately expressed, how can the details of horrendous events be described in their true light? Day and night, Borowski watches throngs of men, women, and children walk a death march to the gas chambers while the band plays. How can he describe this to someone who is not there? How can he attempt to use such common, “ordinary words” (Borowski 94) to explain a completely unordinary, gut-wrenchingly emotional and confusing situation? Borowski implies that if the vocabulary used to explain the death march is the same that he would use to explain something “petty and unimportant” (94), then new words are needed. The old words cannot convey an accurate truth.

Furthermore, even if the authors manage to use current language to communicate what the Holocaust was to those who did not personally experience it, those people may not be able to understand or fathom the events. Levi says significantly, “What we commonly mean by

‘understand’ coincides with ‘simplify’” (*The Drowned* 36), meaning that when someone claims to comprehend something in actuality they are only understanding partial truth. The transmitted information has missing pieces. Considering the complexity of the Holocaust and of the events that trespassed against the authors, their accounts would be diminished if what a reader gets out of them is only a simplification of the material. Simplification prevents depth, so what is left behind is only surface material. Perhaps the only true understanding comes when a person physically puts himself in another’s shoes. Maybe the only way to truly understand what someone goes through is to walk alongside him. If this is the case, no reader can deeply and truly understand (in terms of non-simplified comprehension) unless he has the experience of being a prisoner in the camp. For example, Wiesel does not realize or believe the real horrors of the Holocaust until the day he and his family step onto the crowded transport. Before this happens, Wiesel does not believe Moishe the Beadle’s warning narrative about witnessing people digging their own graves and Nazis flinging infants into the air and shooting them (*Night* 6). ““You don’t understand...I wanted to come back to warn you. Only no one is listening to me...”” (Wiesel 7) Moishe cries, realizing everyone’s ears have turned away from what they cannot fathom. Wiesel is one of those who do not fully believe Moishe’s words. Expanding the point that experience is necessary for true understanding, Borowski recounts a tale in which the narrator asks a man from Auschwitz what being in a camp is like. Instead of trying to describe it, the Auschwitz man rebuffs, ““Come and you’ll see for yourself. Why should I waste my breath? It would be like talking to children”” (Borowski 125). The man’s audience, like children, would be completely unable to comprehend the horrors described without having experienced it themselves. The disconnect that exists between being told a story and undergoing it oneself causes a gap in understanding, which often leads to disbelief. Significantly, however, even the victims of the

Holocaust may have difficulty believing such traumatic events happened to them. If those who lived through the horror cannot understand, then how can non-witnesses do what the victims cannot? Levi writes about the tests he went through to become a Specialist, a prioritized member of the Chemical Kommando, and then contemplates, “Today...I myself am not convinced that these things really happened” (*Survival* 103). Whether by fading in time or being convoluted in recalling the event, the memory does not render itself believable to Levi.

Language may be inadequate to relay the whole truth, but an even greater issue is the fact that memory is unstable. The authors rely on memory to transfer their stories to paper. Levi emphasizes the limitations of memory, which can be forgotten, misconstrued purposefully, and damaged with time. In warning, he makes the statement that the “scant reliability of our memories will be satisfactorily explained only when we know in what language...they are written...to this day we are still far from this goal” (Levi, *The Drowned* 23). Levi expresses the fact that memories of people who experience traumatic events are not cohesive. These memories lack parts due in part to the strict attention paid only to the basic human needs of food, water, and survival (*The Drowned* 17). How can one be aware of his surroundings when all he can focus on are his immediate problems? Wiesel, Levi, and Borowski face traumatic situations on a daily basis in the camps, and quite often they remark that the first thought on their minds is food and self-preservation. Lines such as “the deportees were quickly forgotten,” and “the absent no longer entered our thoughts” (*Night* 6, 36) frequent the pages of Wiesel’s memoir. This highlights the many moments in which the absent or dead are easily overlooked when a man is so focused on his own survival. Memory is not perfect, and the more perilous the situation, the more fleeting the memory. In addition, witnesses sometimes repress traumatic memories because remembering them is just as horrible. This is not to say that the accounts of Wiesel, Levi, and

Borowski are invalid or incomplete renditions of their time in the camp, but rather that the limitations of memory create holes in the full truth. This “full” truth is what the authors try to communicate to the rest of the world. Borowski says, “One day we shall have the courage to tell the world *the whole truth* and call it by its proper name (italics mine)” (122). He does not aim for partial veracity, but his aim may be skewed by the limitations of both language and memory.

As the notion that absolute truth is possible begins to collapse during the authors’ time in the camps, the recognition of an overarching truth about the Machiavellian tendencies of humankind becomes apparent. This realization is that man strives to attain power and in doing so exploits other men. The end justifies the means: it is not of consequence that another man is damaged in the process if one man prospers as a result. Levi considers this to be the closest explanation of how the Holocaust could have possibly occurred. Throughout history, man has been enticed by power, and by the privilege that comes with it (Levi, *The Drowned* 42). The further up the ladder they get, the more they desire to reach the next rung. In order to step up, man must tread on the back of another beneath him. Borowski begins to realize this as well: “What [a] price was paid for building the ancient civilizations. The Egyptian pyramids, the temples, and Greek statues—what a hideous crime they were! ...The conspiracy of free men against slaves! ...A product of human sweat, blood and hard labour” (131-132). Borowski postulates that the greatest monuments of ancient history stand on the unprivileged men who built them. Egypt’s temples stand on the backs of Hebrew slaves who constructed them, and who were beaten by the men of power who towered above them with whips. The United States became an agricultural superpower by the hands of African American slaves. For one man to gain, another must suffer, but the suffering of the unprivileged is perceived as a necessary, honorable act so the rest of the privileged world can progress. The end justifies the means. Levi

points out that this habitual act of man is what runs the camps: “The privileged oppress the unprivileged: the social structure of the camp is based on this human law” (*Survival* 44).

Furthermore, he presents this idea of man persecuting his lesser counterpart using the Divine Comedy. Levi tries to explain the Comedy to his comrade, Pikolo, to make him understand its meaning. One insightful line illuminates man’s motive for power that wrote history: “and the prow went down, as pleased Another” (*Survival*, 114). When one man sinks into the waters, another prospers at the first’s expense. Levi believes this line explains why he, and everyone else, is being tortured in a camp, and why history continues to repeat itself (*Survival*, 115). Man, motivated by power, exploits his brother, and considers his act justifiable under the premise of improving the world. The Nazis used this same excuse; ridding the world of Jews, forever, would make room for Aryans to prosper.

Levi, however, brings in an interesting point in showing that no one is exempt from this tendency for a man to gain when another suffers. The significance of “no one” leads to the conclusion that this tendency itself is an absolute. He describes the guilt that comes with the fact that he survived instead of thousands of other Jews: “each one of us...has usurped his neighbor’s place and lived in his stead” (Levi, *The Drowned* 82). He proposes that no man, not even those who survived by chance in the Holocaust while others perished, can claim to be exempt from this Machiavellian tendency. Even intellectuals like himself cannot prove their lack of guilt: “by his very nature the intellectual...tends to become an accomplice of Power, and therefore approves of it” (Levi, *The Drowned* 145). Certain German intellectuals that he mentions have the power of knowledge, but this power entices them to reach further, for power not just over their own minds, but also over others.

Not only is this trait widespread, but also it is ingrained and instinctual. Levi explains how this great truth about mankind is deeply rooted “like a woodworm; although unseen by the outside” (Levi, *The Drowned* 82). The idea that this human trait is embedded into the psyche of mankind is evidenced further by the offhand way it is described as a “normal” reaction in Borowski’s writing. In his book, Tadek begins to examine his actions and asks himself if he is a good person. He hates the Jews because their existence is the reason he, too, must be in a camp, and so he inflicts his anger toward the helpless victims. His friend Henri retorts, “The easiest way to relieve your hate is to turn against someone weaker. Why, I’d even call it healthy. It’s simple logic” (Borowski 40). The fact that hurting another man to serve a personal agenda is seen as logical, even natural, shows just how ingrained this desire for privilege and power is. People can deny the existence of what Levi calls an evil woodworm, but all have it. This goes back to when Borowski claims that all men are part of the evil, and the same idea is repeated when Levi points out, “No man is an island...every bell tolls for everyone” (*The Drowned* 85). Alas, this tendency, this truth about mankind, is preeminent among humanity and therefore absolute. When this tendency is coupled with the idea that there is no absolute truth in personal faith and beliefs, one can see how the Holocaust has pushed these two truths into war with one another.

This tendency to exploit other men is contagious, which results in the problem being a common evil among humanity. This, in part, is the fault of the perpetrator, the Nazis who brought the Jews down to their level. Levi posits, “An inhuman regime spreads and extends its inhumanity in all directions, also and especially downward...it corrupts its victims” (*The Drowned* 112). He says that the Jews have become “as inhuman” as the Nazis, their perpetrators (Levi, *The Drowned* 54). As the man two steps from the top of the ladder uses the man beneath

him to reach the next rung, the man beneath him must adapt and use equally evil means to fight back. This raises the question of where the line is drawn between selfish cruelty and defensive cruelty, and if either of those options is justifiable.

All of this is not to say that the Holocaust was not unique, but it did serve as a more extreme illustration of this customary human propensity. The motives underneath the Holocaust, the human desires for power and privilege, were similar to historical events, but the happenings of the Holocaust were more terrible and horrendous than any in the history of the world. Levi says one great difference between the Holocaust and human history is useless violence (*The Drowned* 109). He claims that pain “was an end in itself” (Levi, *The Drowned* 109), meaning that there was no greater purpose to the cruelty the Nazis put their prisoners through, no motive for a constructive result. Rather, the motive was for Jews to feel pain. Prisoners built a rubber factory, enduring terrible hardship and suffering in the process, from which no rubber was produced. There existed no justification for its creation, but the Nazis acquired what they wanted out of the process: the torture of Jews. If the Nazis employed useful violence, then perhaps the Holocaust’s purpose could be better understood, at least in terms of utility. This further drives the point that the Holocaust is beyond understanding.

It is ironic to note that the authors write in order to make their readers understand and to prevent history from rewriting itself, when at the same time Levi points out the innateness of mankind’s Machiavellian tendencies. History, he shows, is bound to repeat itself as a result of this primitive, ingrained human desire for power. Wiesel, Levi, and Borowski, however, still write to make people understand, and though they think people will not listen, they still put pen to paper in the hope that some will. Out of some miracle, they believe people may grasp how crucial this information is and prevent another event like the Holocaust from happening. If they

truly had no hope of some grasping this idea, then they would not have needed to survive to transmit the information, nor would they have written anything at all. Hope, even though the authors themselves admit it can be deceptive, is what drives them to survive. Part of this hopefulness results from interactions with certain people who retain kindness and humanity in the camps. If there are people like that in the camps, then maybe there are others like them in the outside world who will understand. Levi muses over the fact that nothing is black and white: no one can be perfectly happy or perfectly unhappy, or totally joyful or in complete grief (*Survival* 17). Everything exists on a spectrum with no definitive endpoints. Thus, he is indirectly claiming that there can be no human state of complete hope and trust or complete despair. Though the camps were a place in which hope seemed futile, human nature will always hold on to even the most seemingly insignificant sliver of hope, no matter how false it may prove to be.

When Wiesel and the Jews of his town are being shoved around by Nazis, taken from their homes, and treated as dogs, they hold on to hope. In the midst of crisis, they deny the looming torture that awaits them. Wiesel recounts in one of those instances, “Optimism soon revived: The Germans will not come this far” (*Night* 9). When they hear stories about Jews in other areas, the Jews of Sighet continue their normal lives, convinced that Hitler will not reach them. When this false hope is crushed and he finds himself in a camp, Wiesel still clings to the hope that he will not be thrown into the fire pit two steps away (*Night* 34). Even though he claims that he is preparing to break rank to avoid the pits, he does not. If he really had no hope of not being pushed in, he would have fled earlier.

Levi retains hope in humanity when he interacts with Alberto and Lorenzo. Levi claims that Alberto “did not become corrupt. I always saw, and still see in him, the rare figure of the strong yet peace-loving man against whom the weapons of the night are blunted” (*Survival* 57).

This is a description of someone whose humanity has resisted the corruption of the camps. When Levi receives the position in the Chemical Kommando, Alberto congratulates him not with envy or restraint, but with genuine happiness for the welfare of Levi, his best friend (*Survival* 138). Lorenzo, another man who retains his humanity and gives Levi hope, is the person to whom Levi credits his survival. Lorenzo, out of the goodness of his heart, gives Levi bread and soup on a daily basis (*Survival* 119). Significantly, Levi recounts that this man gives him hope “that there still exist[s] a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole... a remote possibility of good, but for which it [is] worth surviving” (*Survival* 121). Thanks to the unselfish, non-reward-seeking kindness Lorenzo extends to Levi, Levi manages to grasp on to the belief that there is still good in the world, and that he is still a man worthy of being acknowledged by another. It is significant to note that Levi recognizes that these humans are the exceptions to the rule. He does not delude himself with the idea that all men will endure the evil done to them without being corrupted by its power.

Similar to Levi’s recognition of the rare goodness of man in the midst of corruption, Borowski hopes for a better world after the Holocaust. What differs in their perspective is the fact that Borowski thinks the entire world, rather than a few men, can turn from evil after the Holocaust. He questions, “Do you really think that, without the hope that such a world is possible, that the rights of man will be restored again, we could stand the concentration camp even for one day” (121)? With hope comes the will to survive for Borowski just as it does for Levi. In one of the Auschwitz letters, Borowski tells the story of an old, dying Jew whose last words exemplify that the instigator of the struggle for survival is hope. In his last moments before the SS take him to the gas, the man grasps onto hope. He says, ““There will be no borders after the war, I know, and there will be no countries, no concentration camps, and people will

never kill one another” (Borowski 129). This man, though he is about to experience one of the worst atrocities committed by his kin, believes in this better world in the aftermath of the evil one in which he lives. His hope for that utopia has made him cling to life up until it is forcefully taken from him: ““It is our last fight. ...[I] died so that there would be no more borders. Or wars. Or concentration camps”” (Borowski 129). He believes his death has a purpose, and that purpose is to make way for a time in which man will unite and counter evil. This delusive hope is what Borowski considers to be the reason people die in the camps. “Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm. ... We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in the gas chambers” (121-122), Borowski remarks. The inability to lose hope, which is a powerful human tendency, is dangerous in places where the definition of hope is deception.

Trying to uncover the truths of the Holocaust proves difficult for the authors. They struggle with the polarization of the two worlds: the one outside the barbed wire, and the evil one within, in which mankind has regressed to its primitive nature. This polarization of worlds coincides with the war between personal truths and the destructive tendencies of mankind. The basic human need to be understood permeates the accounts of Wiesel, Levi, and Borowski, and questions regarding the validity of human communication and memory provide no absolute answers. Perhaps it is better not to attempt understanding, for with it comes the realization of the vast, evil capacity of man in the past, present, and probable future. Knowing what man can and is willing to do regardless of circumstance and opposition is enough to turn one distrustful human against another, and this act of man against man is the root of why and how the frenzy of the Holocaust began. False hope, language, memory, and beliefs all point to the futility of current understanding. We must go above and beyond, question everything, in order to push past these

barriers of current thought. With the current scope of intellectuality, that non-simplified understanding is unreachable. Perhaps what our purpose should be is to attain a greater scope, in order to fulfill that most basic need to be understood, for the sake of others and us. Perhaps the reason the authors had such great difficulty coping after the Holocaust was because that basic need had yet to be fulfilled. Without that need met, they were at a standstill, and that took a great toll upon their souls, minds, and self-worth.

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