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The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps

Do you know how one says never in camp slang? Morgen früh tomorrow morning.

PRIMO LEVI

Suppose Dante's pilgrim in the *Divine Comedy* had arrived at the exit from the Inferno to find the way barred by a barbed wire fence, posted with warnings reading "No trespassing. Violators will be annihilated." When the spiritual and psychological equivalents of Purgatory and Paradise are excluded from human possibility, to be replaced by the daily threat of death in the gas chamber, then we glimpse the negative implications of survival, especially for the Jews, in the Nazi extermination camps. After we peel from the surface of the survivor ordeal the veneer of dignified behavior, hope, mutual support and the inner resolve to resist humiliation, we find beneath a raw and quivering anatomy of human existence resembling no society we have ever encountered before. When such an existence transforms the life instinct and forces men and women who would remain alive to suspend the golden rule and embrace the iron one of "do unto others before it is done unto you," we must expect some moral rust to flake from the individual soul. We are left with a spectacle of reality that few would choose to celebrate, *if* they could tolerate a world where words like dignity and choice had temporarily lost their traditional meaning because Nazi brutality had eliminated the human supports that usually sustain them. But such a world so threatens our sense of spiritual

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continuity that it is agonizing to imagine or consent to its features without introducing some affirmative values to mitigate the gloom.

For those like Viktor Frankl who see life as a challenge to give meaning to being, the notion that the *situation* in Auschwitz deprived being of meaning is the highest form of impiety. He speaks of the deathcamp as a "living laboratory" or "testing ground" where he witnessed how "some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints." But this arbitrary division into heroes and villains is misleading, since it totally ignores the even more arbitrary environment that shaped human conduct in Auschwitz. Frankl cannot resist the temptation to incorporate the deathcamp experience into his world view, to make events serve his theory of behavior: "Man has both potentialities within himself: which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on condition."¹ This may be an accurate description of human character in a Dostoevsky novel: we shall see how much evidence Frankl was required to ignore to protect his image of man in the deathcamps as a self-determining creature, no matter how humiliating his surroundings. Auschwitz was indeed a laboratory and testing ground, but if we contemplate the "experiment" without rigid moral preconceptions, we discover that men could not be divided simply into saints and swine, and that self-actualization as a concept evaporates when impossible conditions obliterate the possible decisions we have been trained to applaud. To speak of survival in Auschwitz as a form of self-actualization is to mock language and men, especially those who did not survive.

If we pursue the proposition that some stains of the soul of history—and the Holocaust is such a stain—are indelible, where will it lead us? It will lead us certainly to an unfamiliar version of survival, to the conclusion that after Auschwitz the idea of human dignity could never be the same again. It will force us to reexamine the language of value that we used before the event, and to admit that at least when describing the Holocaust, if not its consequences, such language may betray the spirit and the facts of the ordeal. Perhaps this is what Primo Levi, himself a survivor, was trying to say in *Survival in Auschwitz* when he wrote:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say "hunger," we say "tiredness," "fear," "pain," we say "winter" and they are different

things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers [camps] 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, and wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing near.²

This crucial observation leaves us with a profound dilemma, since no one has yet invented a vocabulary of annihilation to modify the language of transcendence employed by Frankl and similar commentators. For this reason we must bring to every "reading" of the Holocaust experience a wary consciousness of the way in which "free words" and their associations may distort the facts or alter them into more manageable events.

The consequences of this predicament may seem threatening to the conservative ethical intelligence, but they are nonetheless unavoidable. They illuminate a version of survival less flattering to the human creature than more traditional accounts, but their spokesmen and spokeswomen deserve a hearing if only to clarify our vision of how utterly the Nazi mentality corrupted moral reality for the victims. Moreover, this complementary vision may enable us to comprehend better how little discredit falls to these victims, who were plunged into a crisis of what might call "choiceless choice," where critical decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of "abnormal" response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing. Consider this brief episode narrated by Judith Sternberg Newman, a nurse by profession, who was deported to Auschwitz from Breslau with 197 other Jewish women: three weeks later, only eighteen of them were still alive:

Two days after Christmas, a Jewish child was born on our block. How happy I was when I saw this tiny baby. It was a boy, and the mother had been told that he would be taken care of. Three hours later, I saw a small package wrapped in cheese cloth lying on a wooden bench. Suddenly it moved. A Jewish girl employed as a clerk came over, carrying a pan of cold water. She whispered to me "Hush! Quiet! Go away!" But I remained, for I could not understand what she had in mind. She picked up the little package—it

was the baby, of course—and it started to cry with a thin little voice. She took the infant and submerged its little body in the cold water. My heart beat wildly in agitation. I wanted to shout "Murderess!" but I had to keep quiet and could not tell anyone. The baby swallowed and gurgled, its little voice chattering like a small bird, until its breath became shorter and shorter. The woman held its head in the water. After about eight minutes the breathing stopped. The woman picked it up, wrapped it up again, and put it with the other corpses. Then she said to me, "We had to save the mother, otherwise she would have gone to the gas chamber." This girl had learned well from the SS and had become a murderess herself.³

How is one to pass judgment on such an episode, or relate it to the inner freedom celebrated by other commentators on the deathcamp experience? Does moral choice have any meaning here? The drama involves the helpless infant, whose fate is entirely in someone else's hands (and the fate of the infant Oedipus only reminds us of how far life in Auschwitz had drifted from the moral order, to say nothing of the moral ironies, of art); the absent mother, who may or may not have approved of the action; the "agent" who coolly sacrifices one life to preserve another, as a deed of naked necessity, without appeal, not of moral choice; and the author, sole witness to a crime that is simultaneously an act of charity and perhaps of literal secular salvation to the mother. Conventional vocabulary limps through a situation that allows no heroic response, no acceptable gesture of protest, no mode of action to permit *any* of the participants, including the absent mother, to retain a core of human dignity. The *situation* itself forbids it, together with the Nazi "law" stating that mothers who refuse to surrender their newborn infants to death must accompany them to the gas chamber. This predatory profile of survival, when fear of such death, not affirmation of a basic human dignity, drives men and women to behavior they would not consider under normal circumstances, confirms another moment when reality defeats both a language of judgment and mode of moral behavior: "I wanted to shout 'Murderess!' but I had to keep quiet and could not tell anyone."

In the absence of humanly significant alternatives—that is, alternatives enabling an individual to make a decision, act on it, and accept the consequences, all within a framework that supports personal integrity and self-esteem—one is plunged into a moral turmoil that may

silence judgment, as in the above example, but cannot paralyze all action, if one still wishes to remain alive. Ella Lingens-Reiner, another Auschwitz survivor, offers a crude but critical instance of how effectively the optionless anguish of the deathcamp could alienate dignity from choice. In her barracks there was a single limited source of water for washing and for draining excrement from the latrine. If the women took the water for washing, the primitive sewage system would be blocked, creating an intolerably offensive (and unhealthy) situation. Outside the camp, there would be various options to solve this dilemma: complain to the landlord or health department, call a plumber or find a new source of water—or simply change your residence. In Auschwitz they were of course excluded. Lingens-Reiner lucidly sums up the condition of choiceless choice, where the only alternatives are between two indignities: “It is dreadful to be without water; it is impossible to let people take away all the water while feces are piling up in the ditches!”⁴ As one wavers between the “dreadful” and the “impossible,” one begins to glimpse a deeper level of reality in the deathcamps, where moral choice as we know it was superfluous, and inmates were left with the futile task of redefining decency in an atmosphere that could not support it.

In contradiction to those who argue that the only way of surviving was to cling to the values of civilized living despite the corrupting influence of the deathcamps, Lingens-Reiner insists that those who tried to salvage such moral luggage imposed fatal burdens on themselves. She tells of her own difficulty in ridding herself of such inclinations: shortly after arriving, she says, “I was still under the impression that it was advisable for people in our situation to behave with exemplary correctness. To the very last I could not get rid of this notion, although it was quite absurd. In reality only those prisoners had a chance to survive in the camp—if they were not privileged on account of their profession, beauty, or other specially favorable circumstances—who were determined to do the exact opposite of what they were told to do, on principle to break every rule governing civilian life.”⁵ This harshly practical view flatters no one, neither the author nor her companions nor the reader, all of whom are confronted by conditions that with very few exceptions *prohibit* the exercise of uncontaminated moral freedom and hence the achievement of a tragic dignity to temper the austerity of human doom in Auschwitz.

We have seen that the sharing which represents a social ideal in

normal societies was not necessarily the most effective, and certainly not always the most possible form of behavior in the deathcamps. Even less accessible in that degrading environment was the moral idea which celebrates the dignity of the self through conscious choice. Suppose we suspend our need to discover an ethics of survival, whether based on moral values or social imperatives, and approach the camp ordeal as one from which no familiar or generally acceptable system of cause and effect behavior can be derived. The implications reach far beyond moral ideology to the role of time and history in human destiny, to the structure of character and the very unity of our lives in the twentieth century. History assures us that man is superior to time when retrospectively he can explain the unexpected, account, in this instance, for the extermination of a people, uncover a system for surviving and thus reduce the event to a partial intellectual order that somehow theoretically balances the price in human lives paid for that order. But from the perspective of the victims, who of course far outnumbered the survivors, the disorder of meaningless death contradicts the ordering impulses of time. Those who died for nothing during the Holocaust left the living with the paralyzing dilemma of facing a perpetually present grief. To the puzzled inquiry why interest in the Holocaust seems to grow as the event recedes in time, one answer may be that there is no inner space to bury it in.

Ella Lingens-Reiner helps to illuminate this paradox. As time passed, she says, the sense of the world outside (*our world still*) blurred, and the inner life of people who endured months and years in the camps atrophied. Such people “transferred their ambitions and emotions to the life inside the camp. Therefore they would fight for positions not only because they intended to survive, but also for their own sake, because it satisfied their need to win power, recognition and a following within the precincts. Some of them invested their whole being in these matters, and so lost much of their intellectual and even moral standards.” She writes not with contempt, but with compassion, with an effort to convey how subtly a deathcamp-inspired behaviour could infiltrate a common sense of dignity and triumph over the victim’s vision of decency. After praising the tremendous achievement of some women for preserving “their personal integrity in spite of everything,” she adds with utter frankness: “the truly frightening thing was that women who had striven for that integrity, who still took life and ethics seriously, proved in the end too small for their overwhelming

destiny, and never noticed when they acted on principles which were in reality those of National Socialism.”⁶ She speaks not of habitual criminals, or self-serving collaborators, but of individual women who believe in integrity but find their response to reality determined by a “destiny” that admits no meaningful moral opposition: the threat of death in Auschwitz.

Such a destiny created a situation beyond good and evil that even a Nietzsche could not imagine. How are we to portray or apply ethical measures to that prototypical example of choiceless choice, the mother of three children who reputedly was told by the Nazis that she might save *one* of them from execution? She was free to “choose,” but what civilized mind could consider this an exercise of moral choice, or discover in modern history or Jewish tradition a myth to dignify her dilemma? The alternatives are not difficult, they are *impossible*, and we are left with the revelation of a terrifying question posed by a universe that lacks a vision to contain it. How is character to survive *any* decision in such a situation, and retain a semblance of human dignity? The human need *outside* the deathcamps to see the Holocaust as some kind of continuum in the spiritual history of man repeatedly stumbles over the limits of language, to say nothing of the limits of traditional moral theory. An entire ethical vocabulary, which for generations furnished a sanctuary for motive and character, no matter how terrible the external details, has been corrupted by the facts of *this* event.

Against the natural longing for a Moment of Truth in the deathcamps, when the human will asserted itself and a reborn dignity prevailed, we must measure moments of truth like the following, narrated by Hermann Langbein in *Menschen in Auschwitz* from a report by David Rousset, who was describing a group of “selectees” being escorted to the gas chamber:

An old man, who could hardly move his legs any more, sat down along the way. An accompanying guard roared at him: “Get moving, or I’ll beat you within an inch of your life!” Quickly the old man exclaimed: “No, don’t kill me. I’m going, I’m going!” and rejoined the procession to the gas chamber.⁷

Once again the choice is not between life and death, resistance and submission, courage and cowardice, but between two forms of humili-

ation, in this instance each leading to the extinction of a life. By shielding himself instinctively from an immediate threat, the victim inadvertently consigns himself to a consequent one: once one’s ultimate fate had been decided by the murderers—and for the Jews, extermination was their fate from the moment they entered the camps—freedom of moral decision vanished because the antagonist was in total control of the means of supporting life and the manner of imposing death. One could not escape one’s enfolding doom, even temporarily, by pretending that responses from the normal world would be heard with sympathetic ears. Langbein’s example dramatically ratifies that. Perhaps this is what one survivor meant when he wrote bitterly: “Only to survive, to survive, everything consists in that, and the forms of survival are extreme and loathsome [*ekelhaft*], they are not worth the price of a life.”⁸

The illusion that under the worst of circumstances—and in Auschwitz, for the Jews and Soviet prisoners of war in particular, all but a few of the circumstances were of the “worst”—men and women could meaningfully distinguish between what they did (or suffered) and the attitude they adopted toward their deeds is supported more easily by language than by events. The relation between deed and motive, fate and intent (so vital to familiar moral discourse) collapsed so often in the deathcamps that it ceased to represent an ethical bulwark for the victims. “I lived better than many of my comrades,” confessed one of the prisoner functionaries, “without feeling that it was immoral. In the concentration camp, no one has the right to judge himself according to moral rules that would be valid in normal times.”⁹ This survivor is not *proud* of his behavior, nor is he particularly happy about the suspension of values that dominated the general struggle to survive in the world of Auschwitz. Imagine the desolation of Salmen Lewental, whose diary was literally unearthed from the ashes of Auschwitz in 1962, as he tries to describe what the will to survive has done to prisoners who were forced to live “ill” beyond conception by the daily routine of destruction:

Why do you do such ignoble work, what do you live for, what is your aim in life, what do you desire . . . what would you like to achieve living this kind of life . . . And here is the crux . . . of our Kommando, which I have no intention to defend as a whole. I must speak the truth here, that some of that group have in the course of

time so entirely lost themselves that we ourselves were simply ashamed. They simply forgot what they were doing . . . and with time . . . they got so used to it that it was even strange [that one wanted] to weep and to complain: that . . . such normal, average . . . simple and unassuming men . . . of necessity got used to everything so that these happenings make no more impression on them. Day after day they stand and look on how tens of thousands of people are perishing and [do] nothing.¹⁰

This is description, not judgment: man is a creature who adapts. Lewental's shame does not presume blame, nor do his questions about purpose and goal expect replies. He had already answered his questions in an earlier fragment of the diary: "one wants to live because one lives, because the whole world lives." Members of the Sonderkommando did not choose degradation, any more than the luckier kitchen workers or medical orderlies "chose" decency. Reduced to the condition of choiceless choice, the human creature exists from hour to hour, often from minute to minute. "Do you think, perhaps, that I *volunteered* for this work?" rings out the desperate voice of another Sonderkommando member, who like Lewental did not survive? "What should I have done? . . . You think the members of the Sonderkommando are monsters? I tell you, they're like the others only more unfortunate."¹¹

Tadeusz Borowski in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, tells the story of a smaller concentration camp where new prisoners arrived daily. The camp had a limited quantity of supplies, and the Kommandant disliked seeing the prisoners starve to death. But every day the camp seemed to have a few dozen more men than it could feed. "So every evening," he says, "a ballot, using cards or matches, was held in every block, and the following morning the losers did not go to work. At noon they were led out behind the barbed-wire fence and shot."¹² Few examples could illustrate more effectively the notion of choiceless choice. The victims are offered an option that is no option, since the results of a lottery are governed by chance, not choice. And obviously, anyone who refused to participate in the macabre game certified his execution the next day. Refusal to participate in the ritual of extermination was not a meaningful alternative for the victim because he shared no responsibility for the situation which condemned him to such an existence. He lacked the power to act

physically in behalf of his own survival, and without this power (which through luck or collaboration or good connections might be *bestowed* on him), no mere control of attitude or feeling of spiritual inviolability could salvage his moral self. Since the deathcamp universe eliminated conditions which support worth, the victim could not "choose" extermination and remain human, while the survivor could not "choose" life and remain human. He could strive for life and, if lucky, remain *alive*: but this was a struggle between states of being, not competing values.

After having "witnessed" some of the agonizing dilemmas confronting prisoners in the deathcamps, we should be less persuaded by comforting halftruths like the following, from Viktor Frankl's version of survival: "Psychological observations of the prisoners have shown that only men who allowed their inner hold on their moral and spiritual selves to subside eventually fell victim to the camp's degenerating influences."¹³ How do we present this sanctimonious view to the woman who was forced to drown an infant to save the mother, or the other woman who could only stand by in silence? We have seen that when the environment in Auschwitz supported one person's life, it was often at the cost of another's death—not because victims made wrong choices, or no choices, but because dying was the "purpose" of living in this particular environment: it was the nature of Auschwitz. The need to equate moral activity with continued existence and moral passivity with death reflects a desperate desire to retain some ethical coherence in a chaotic universe. But the "decision to survive" is contradicted by the condition of "choiceless choice," and may betray nothing more than a misuse of what Primo Levi called "free words": using language to create value where none exists. The real challenge before us is to invent a vocabulary of annihilation appropriate to the deathcamp experience; in its absence, we should at least be prepared to redefine the terminology of transcendence—"dignity," "choice," "suffering," and "spirit"—so that it conforms more closely to the way of being in places like Auschwitz, where the situation that consumed so many millions imposed *impossible* decisions on victims not free to embrace the luxury of the heroic life.

NOTES

1. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), pp. 212-213.
2. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Collier Books, 1969), pp. 112-113.
3. Judith Sternberg Newman, *In the Hell of Auschwitz* (New York: Exposition Press, 1963), pp. 42-43.
4. Ella Lingens-Reiner, *Prisoners of Fear* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), p. 29.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
7. Hermann Langbein, *Menschen in Auschwitz* (Wien: Europaverlag, 1972), p. 134. Translation mine.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
10. Jadwiga Bezwinska, ed., *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Members of Sonderkommando*, trans. Krystyna Michalik (State Museum of Oświęcim, 1973), p. 139.
11. Langbein, p. 225.
12. Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 119.
13. Frankl, p. 110.