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VOICES OF THE HOLOCAUST

Viktor E. Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, writes about his own experiences in the Nazi concentration camps. The following selection underscores the feeling of utter helplessness that he experienced.

FROM VIKTOR E. FRANKL, *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*
(New York: Touchstone, 1959)

The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others. From personal convictions . . . I made myself a firm promise, on my first evening in camp, that I would not "run into the wire." This was a phrase used in camp to describe the most popular method of suicide—touching the electrically charged barbed-wire fence. It was not entirely difficult for me to make this decision. There was little point in committing suicide, since, for the average inmate, life expectation, calculating objectively and counting all likely chances, was very poor. He could not with any assurance expect to be among the small percentage of men who survived all the selections. The prisoner of Auschwitz, in the first phase of shock, did not fear death. Even the gas chambers lost their horrors for him after the first few days—after all, they spared him the act of committing suicide. (31)

The French writer Charlotte Delbo, a non-Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, wrote about her experiences in *Auschwitz and After*. In one chapter of her book, she describes the almost unimaginable pain of her thirst.

FROM CHARLOTTE DELBO, *AUSCHWITZ AND AFTER*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995)

I'd been thirsty for days and days, thirsty to the point of losing my mind, to the point of being unable to eat since there was no saliva in my mouth, so thirsty I couldn't speak, because you're unable to speak when there's no saliva in your month. My parched lips were splitting, my gums
swollen, my tongue a piece of wood. My swollen gums and tongue kept me from closing my mouth, which stayed open like that of a madwoman with dilated pupils in her haggard eyes. At least, this is what others told me, later. They thought I'd lost my mind. I couldn't hear anything, see anything. They even thought that I had gone blind. It took me a long time to explain that, without being blind, I saw nothing. All my senses had been abolished by thirst. (142)

Living in a culture that takes plentiful drinking water for granted, it is hard to image such a deplorable human condition: being so thirsty that you become absolutely senseless.

Born in France about ten years before the war, André Schwarz-Bart lost his entire family in the concentration camps. While serving in the French resistance during the war, he was imprisoned but eventually escaped. Schwarz-Bart's novel, *The Last of the Just*, won the Prix Goncourt. In the following excerpt the protagonist, Ernie Levy, and Golda, the woman he loves, are about to be gassed to death in an SS concentration camp.

FROM ANDRÉ SCHWARZ-BART, *THE LAST OF THE JUST*  

The building resembled a huge bathhouse. To left and right large concrete pots cupped the stems of faded flowers. At the foot of the small wooden stairway an SS man, mustached and benevolent, told the condemned, "Nothing painful will happen! It's a way to prevent contagious diseases. It disinfects." Most of them went in silently, pressed forward by those behind. Inside, numbered coathooks garnished the walls of a sort of gigantic cloakroom where the flock undressed one way or another, encouraged by their SS cicerones, who advised them to remember the numbers carefully. . . . There, under the showerheads embedded in the ceiling, in the blue light of screened bulbs glowing in recesses of the concrete walls, Jewish men and women, children and patriarchs were huddled together. . . . When the first waves of [Z]yclon B gas billowed among the sweating bodies, drifting down toward the squirming carpet of children's heads, Ernie freed himself from the girl's mute embrace and leaned out into the darkness toward the children invisible even at his knees, and he shouted with all the gentleness and all the strength of his soul, "Breathe deeply, my lambs, and quickly!"

When the layers of gas had covered everything, there was silence in the
dark sky of the room for perhaps a minute, broken only by shrill, racking
coughs and the gasps of those too far gone in their agonies to offer a
devo tion.

... 

The voices died one by one in the course of the unfinished poem. The
dying children had already dug their nails into Ernie's thighs, and Golda's
embrace was already weaker, her kisses were blurred when, clinging
fiercely to her beloved's neck, she exhaled a harsh sigh: "Then I'll never
see you again? Never again?" (372–373)
TOPICS FOR WRITTEN AND ORAL DISCUSSION

1. The Holocaust, like any atrocity in history, is a very difficult topic to write about. Attempts at describing such utter horror can sound trite or hollow. Contact a survivor of the Holocaust or a member of the family of a survivor, interview this person, and write an essay about his or her experience. After you have written the essay, analyze it, paying close attention to the words you use to convey the survivor's experience. Are these words that you would use in ordinary conversation or not?

2. Research the Allies' treatment of the Jewish refugees after the war. Was it humane, or did the Allies themselves also treat the Jewish people inhumanely? Debate the issue in class.

3. Research the founding of the Jewish State of Israel and the situation in the Middle East today. Pay close attention to how the Holocaust has impacted that region of the world.

4. Contact a local chapter of any Jewish organization concerned with preventing anti-Semitism. Find out how prevalent anti-Semitism is in the community where you live, as well as in the state, the nation, and the world. Develop a detailed plan for how you and your school can help prevent anti-Semitism.

5. Ignorance is often the essential ingredient in misunderstandings between people. Visit the services of religious groups and denominations other than the one you practice. Describe some of the differences and similarities among the various faiths. Interview a religious leader in one or more of these communities. Ask questions about the history and practices of their religion, especially about things you do not understand. Write an essay about some of the differences and similarities between the religion that you have either practiced or are familiar with, and the one that you researched.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


Friedman, Ada June. Philip Freedman, Roads to Extinction: Essays on


