

WHEN
 HUMANITY
 FAILS toolbox
Forced Labor:

 Excerpt from Primo Levi's memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* October, 1944

"We fought with all our strength to prevent the arrival of winter. We clung to all the warm hours; at every dusk we tried to keep the sun in the sky for a little longer, but it was all in vain. Yesterday evening the sun went down irrevocably¹ behind a confusion of dirty clouds, chimney stacks and wires, and today it is winter.

We know what it means because we were here last winter; and the others will soon learn. I mean that in the course of these months, from October till April, seven out of ten of us will die. Whoever does not die will suffer minute by minute, all day, every day: from the morning before dawn until the distribution of the evening soup we will have to keep our muscles continuously tensed, dance from foot to foot, beat our arms under our shoulders against the cold. We will have to spend bread to acquire gloves, and lose hours of sleep to repair them when they become unstitched. As it will no longer be possible to eat in the open, we will have to eat our meals in the hut, on our feet; everyone will be assigned an area of floor as large as a hand, as it is forbidden to rest against the bunks. Wounds will open on everyone's hands, and to be given a bandage will mean waiting every evening for hours on one's feet in the snow and wind.

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 Lagers² had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born; and only language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, 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.

In the same way in which one sees a hopeful end, winter arrived this morning. We realized it when we left the hut to go and wash: there were no stars, the dark cold air had the smell of snow. In roll-call square, in the gray of dawn, when we assembled for work, no one spoke. When we saw the first flakes of snow, we thought that if at the same time last year they had told us that we would have seen another winter in Lager, we would have gone and touched the electric wire-fence; and that even now we would go if we were logical, were it not for this last senseless crazy residue of unavoidable hope.

—PRIMO LEVI, *Survival in Auschwitz*

¹ Unable to be retracted or reversed, final

² German for "camp"

Photo Analysis

- 1 What type of labor is being portrayed?
- 2 Looking closely at the photograph, are you able to identify one person from the other?
- 3 What kind of jobs or professions do you think these laborers could have had before WWII?
- 4 Have you ever been forced to endure physical pain for a short period of time? How did it feel to endure this pain? How did you get through it?
- 5 Do you think these laborers had any special preparations (rest, drink, food) before their work day began?
- 6 Based on the title of this photograph, *Endurance of Mind and Body*, how do you think a forced laborer got through his day?

Acts of Heroism **ENDURANCE** of Mind and Body to Outlast the Unimaginable

Forced Labor: Jews and other "enemies of the state" were subjected to forced, physical labor under brutal conditions. Beginning in 1933, forced labor was often imposed without proper clothing, nourishment, equipment and rest. From 1942-1944, the Nazis exploited the forced laborers for economic gain and relied on the laborers to boost war productions. Many camps were established in or near industrial plants.

Primary Source Analysis and Questions for Discussion:

- 1 What event is Primo Levi describing in this passage?
- 2 How does the author know that in the winter months "seven out of ten of us will die"?
- 3 When the sun goes down, why does it set behind "dirty clouds," "chimney stacks," and "wires"? What setting is Levi describing?
- 4 What is the "unavoidable hope" that Primo Levi describes at the end of the passage? What keeps them going from day to day?
- 5 Why is it that ordinary words such as "cold," "fear," "hunger," and "winter" have different connotations for a victim of a Nazi concentration camp? How can a Holocaust survivor describe his experience if ordinary words do not give justice to their experiences?
- 6 Using the account of Primo Levi, what can we assume about the men in the photograph in Mauthausen? How do you think they moved through their grueling work load?
- 7 What act of heroism is portrayed in these two scenes?



Concentration camp inmates at forced labor hauling cartloads of earth for the construction of the "Russian camp", April 1942 - May 1942, Mauthausen, Austria

Courtesy of US Holocaust Memorial Museum #12352, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park