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THE CONVERSATION

L'expertise universitaire, l'exigence journalistique



View of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. In 2025, observances commemorate the 80th anniversary of its liberation. A survey of the camp's survivors reveals that they reacted differently to their ordeal. (Shutterstock)

Repression, resentment and resilience: A portrait of concentration camp survivors 80 years after their liberation

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Langues

English

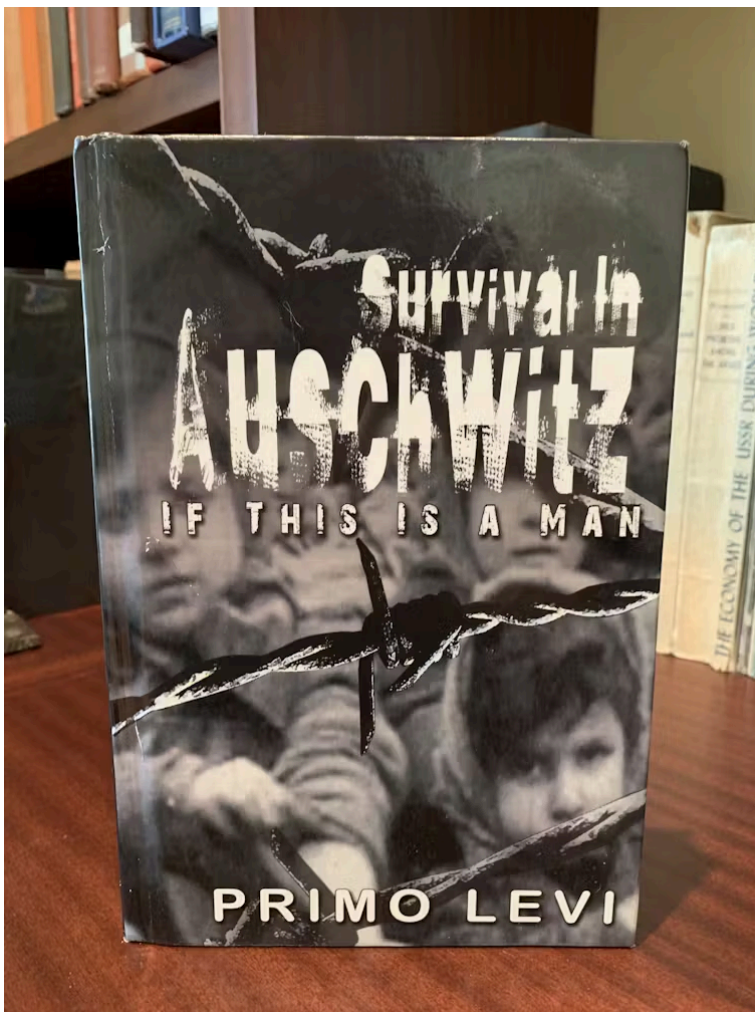
Français

Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Simone Veil — we know some concentration camp survivors today because of the testimonies they wrote, or their political or literary work.

Their names will shine during the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps, including the largest and best known among them, Auschwitz, which was liberated on Jan. 27, 1945 by the Russian army.

As French psychoanalyst Anne-Lise Stern, herself a survivor of this camp in Poland, wrote: “Having been in the camp, alone, does not make you a Primo Levi.” The anonymous survivors did not write successful books (Levi is the author of the moving memoir, *If This is a Man*) and some never shared testimonies of their experience.

We have no shortage of stories about the horrors of the camps. Foundations such as the Shoah Visual History Foundation as well as foundations dedicated to the the memory of the Shoah and the Deportation have collected numerous written, audio and video testimonies from former deportees. But most of these end at the moment the camps were liberated. As for scientific studies, they mainly focus on the physical and psychological impacts of the camps and take little interest in the daily lives of the survivors.



A copy in English of the survivor's great literary success of Auschwitz Primo Levi, published in French under the title *If This is a Man*. (Shutterstock)

This is why, at the beginning of the 2000s, I began studying the journey of 625 Jewish survivors and/or resistance fighters who had been deported from France to Nazi death camps. I interviewed around 30 of them, as well as their families (brothers and sisters, spouses, children).

What is striking at first glance is the diversity in both the survivors' trajectories and their levels of resilience. Some were haunted by nightmares every day until the end of their days, while others went on to live happy lives. Some returned to their previous lives (same job, place of residence and spouse) while others completely changed their lives.

Despite these differences, we can identify four main profiles of survivors.

The repression profile

First, there are those who tried to immediately turn the page after their release and did everything possible to re-enter society, even if it meant denying or repressing the past. Some people had the number tattooed on their skin in the camps erased. They decided to devote their energy to their careers and to starting a family.

However, many realized at the end of their lives that they had been able to hide the past, but not to forget it. Some then began to share testimonies. For example, Jewish Auschwitz survivor Hector worked hard to start his own business. Then a camp friend he met by chance pushed him to tell his story to his children and grandchildren:

"I put the experience inside myself and I didn't talk about it for 40 years."

The identity investment profile

Others, by contrast, became strongly invested in their identity as survivors very early on.

They remained extremely close to their fellow survivors at the camps, whom they considered as brothers and sisters. They devoted a large part of their lives to the transmission of memory, speaking about their experiences regularly in schools and other institutions.

Sometimes the difficulties in their lives (lack of recognition at work, loneliness, a difficult divorce) pushed them to highlight their status as survivors to find more fellowship and social consideration.

For example, Émilien, a Jewish survivor and resistance fighter, put his experiences at the centre of his life after he undergoing economic difficulties and a divorce at the end of the 1970s. He would not have missed a commemorative ceremony for anything in the world, and participated every year in "memory trips" to accompany young people on visits of the Buchenwald camp:

"Those of us who were fortunate enough to return from the camps have a duty to remember, we talk about (those who died in the camps) and pass these memories on to the young generation."



People walk through the former Nazi German death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland in May 2024 as they attend an annual Holocaust remembrance event, the 'March of the Living,' in memory of the six million Holocaust victims. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

The rehashing profile

Even as their lives drew to a close, these survivors never managed to escape the camps, in the sense that they constantly thought about them, and their psychological impacts (insomnia, nightmares, post-traumatic stress syndrome) were still present.

For example, the sight of chimneys reminded them of the crematoria. They were more apt to rehash and relive the experience than distance themselves from it.

Helena, a survivor of Auschwitz, constantly referred to the camps and spoke about them as if they were a recent experience. But her testimony was disjointed: she mixed memories from different times and repeated certain sentences over and over. When she recounted arbitrary assassinations of deportees by Nazi prison guards, she seemed to see the scene again before her eyes.

These are most often survivors who were not expected to return because their family had been decimated, or their spouse had started a new life in the interim. These survivors did not benefit from the convalescence they would have needed to properly deal with the impact of the camps. Subsequent wars in the world depressed them: they saw history repeating itself and felt as if their experiences in a concentration camp had served no purpose.

À lire aussi : Can visiting genocide memorials make you more empathic?

The resilience profile

On the other hand, some survivors demonstrated a great deal of resilience, generally thanks to support from their networks when they returned and from carrying out projects such as changing jobs, starting a united family or pursuing a social cause.

Some saw their time in the death camps as “a parenthesis” between a happy life before and after. Others described their concentration camp experience as their “university,” because they matured in record time; the deportation forged their character. One of them testified:

“My character as a fighter, I perhaps acquired it through suffering. I built myself in survival.”

They experienced the worst of the human condition, but also the best: unforgettable gestures of solidarity with fellow survivors. They generally left the camps with strengthened values: their faith and/or their political convictions were reinforced.

However, they kept some reflexes they acquired when they were hungry. Janine, a survivor of the Bergen-Belsen camp, says:

“I have a lot of trouble throwing away food. That stays with me. I can't help it. I can't throw away rotten fruit. There's nothing I can do about it, I just can't.”

The diversity of these profiles shows the importance of resilience-building factors, such as social support and the ability to adapt and find meaning in life.

La version originale de cet article a été publiée en français.