Survival in Auschwitz is a mostly straightforward narrative, beginning with Primo Levi's deportation from Turin, Italy, to the concentration camp Auschwitz in Poland in 1943. Levi, then a 25-year-old chemist, spent 10 months in the camp. Even Levi's most graphic descriptions of the horrors he witnessed and endured there are marked by a restraint and wit that not only gives readers access to his experience, but confronts them with it in stark ethical and emotional terms: [A]t dawn the barbed wire was full of children's washing hung out in the wind to dry. Nor did they forget the diapers, the toys, the cushions and the hundred other small things which mothers remember and which children always need. Would you not do the same? If you and your child were going to be killed tomorrow, would you not give him something to eat today? --Michael Joseph Gross

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My Personal Review:
In a more perfect life, this book should be science fiction. Primo Levi deposits us in a world where the typical conviviality that makes human society bearable has been eliminated and replaced by a horrible premise: humans may only live if they can do work useful to the state. Survival in Auschwitz plays the theme out. Those who are unable to work are immediately killed, using the most efficient means possible. Those who survive must find ways to maintain the illusion of usefulness with the least possible exertion. Instead of brotherhood, there is commerce, a black market where a stolen bar of soap is traded for a loaf of bread; the soap allows the owner to maintain a more healthy appearance while the bread feeds its owner for another day. We see property in its most base form. A spoon, a bowl, a few trinkets cleverly used, that is all a person can hold at
a time. Its instructive to read this book as an insight into homelessness. What kind of place is this where we create humiliated zombies, shuffling behind their carts containing all their worldly possessions? How long can we let the State fight against the innate emotion that tells us that no-one should go hungry while we eat and no-one should be homeless while we have shelter?

What always amazes me about the Holocaust is the sheer improbability of the story of each of its survivors. This is the horror. For every shining genius of the stature of Primo Levi, there are thousands of other amazing people, gassed and murdered in the showers filled with Zyklon-B.

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