

**VIKTOR E.
FRANKL**

**MAN'S
SEARCH
FOR
MEANING**



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BEACON PRESS
Boston, Massachusetts
www.beacon.org

Beacon Press books are published under the auspices of
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Foreword © 2006 by Harold S. Kushner

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“In Memoriam: Commemorative Speech for the Deceased Colleagues
of the Society of Doctors in Vienna” and “Do We Live Provisionally?”

Translated by Helen Pisano. © 2014 by Beacon Press

“Letter to Wilhelm and Stepha Börner,” “Memorial Speech on the Fortieth
Anniversary of the Liberation of the Türkheim Concentration Camp,” and
“Memorial Speech to Mark the Fiftieth Anniversary of Hitler’s Invasion”
previously appeared in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, translated by Helen
Pisano (London: Rider, 2004). Reprinted here with permission.

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Printed in the United States of America

First published in Germany in 1946 as *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen:
Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager* (“Saying Yes to Life in Spite
of Everything: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp”). First
English-language edition published as *From Death-Camp to Existentialism:
A Psychiatrist’s Path to a New Therapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959).

17 16 15 14 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the uncoated paper
ANSI/NISO specifications for permanence as revised in 1992.

Cover design by Bob Kosturko

Text design by Wilsted & Taylor Publishing Services

INSIDE-FRONT COVER IMAGE: Wedding photo of Viktor Frankl and
Tilly Grosser, 1941

INSIDE-BACK COVER IMAGE: Viktor Frankl in 1994

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data may be found on page 182.

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FOREWORD

VIKTOR FRANKL'S *Man's Search for Meaning* is one of the great books of our time. Typically, if a book has one passage, one idea with the power to change a person's life, that alone justifies reading it, rereading it, and finding room for it on one's shelves. This book has several such passages.

It is first of all a book about survival. Like so many German and East European Jews who thought themselves secure in the 1930s, Frankl was cast into the Nazi network of concentration and extermination camps. Miraculously, he survived, in the biblical phrase "a brand plucked from the fire." But his account in this book is less about his travails, what he suffered and lost, than it is about the sources of his strength to survive. Several times in the course of the book, Frankl approvingly quotes the words of Nietzsche: "He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How." He describes poignantly those prisoners who gave up on life, who had lost all hope for a future and were inevitably the first to die. They died less from lack of food or medicine than from lack of hope, lack of something to live for. By contrast, Frankl kept himself alive and kept hope alive by summoning up thoughts of his wife and the prospect of seeing her again, and by dreaming at one point of lecturing after the war about the psychological lessons to be learned from the Auschwitz experience. Clearly, many prisoners who

desperately wanted to live did die, some from disease, some in the crematoria. But Frankl's concern is less with the question of why most died than it is with the question of why anyone at all survived.

Terrible as it was, his experience in Auschwitz reinforced what was already one of his key ideas: Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning. The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it. At one point, Frankl writes that a person "may remain brave, dignified and unselfish, or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal." He concedes that only a few prisoners of the Nazis were able to do the former, "but even one such example is sufficient proof that man's inner strength may raise him above his outward fate."

Finally, Frankl's most enduring insight, one that I have called on often in my own life and in countless counseling situations: Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you.

There is a scene in Arthur Miller's play *Incident at Vichy* in which an upper-middle-class professional man appears before the Nazi authority that has occupied his town and shows his credentials: his university degrees, his letters of reference from

prominent citizens, and so on. The Nazi asks him, “Is that everything you have?” The man nods. The Nazi throws it all in the wastebasket and tells him: “Good, now you have nothing.” The man, whose self-esteem had always depended on the respect of others, is emotionally destroyed. Frankl would have argued that we are never left with nothing as long as we retain the freedom to choose how we will respond.

My own congregational experience has shown me the truth of Frankl’s insights. I have known successful businessmen who, upon retirement, lost all zest for life. Their work had given their lives meaning. Often it was the only thing that had given their lives meaning and, without it, they spent day after day sitting at home, depressed, “with nothing to do.” I have known people who rose to the challenge of enduring the most terrible afflictions and situations as long as they believed there was a point to their suffering. Whether it was a family milestone they wanted to live long enough to share or the prospect of doctors finding a cure by studying their illness, having a Why to live for enabled them to bear the How.

And my own experience echoes Frankl’s in another way. Just as the ideas in my book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* gained power and credibility because they were offered in the context of my struggle to understand the illness and death of our son, Frankl’s doctrine of logotherapy, curing the soul by leading it to find meaning in life, gains credibility against the background of his anguish in Auschwitz. The last half of the book without the first would be far less effective.

I find it significant that the Foreword to the 1962 edition of *Man’s Search for Meaning* was written by a prominent psychologist, Dr. Gordon Allport, and the Foreword to this new edition is written by a clergyman. We have come to recognize that this

is a profoundly religious book. It insists that life is meaningful and that we must learn to see life as meaningful despite our circumstances. It emphasizes that there is an ultimate purpose to life. And in its original version, before a postscript was added, it concluded with one of the most religious sentences written in the twentieth century:

We have come to know Man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the *Shema Yisrael* on his lips.

HAROLD S. KUSHNER

Harold S. Kushner is rabbi emeritus at Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts, and the author of several best-selling books, including When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Living a Life That Matters, and When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough.

PREFACE TO THE 1992 EDITION

THIS BOOK HAS NOW LIVED TO SEE nearly one hundred printings in English—in addition to having been published in twenty-one other languages. And the English editions alone have sold more than three million copies.

These are the dry facts, and they may well be the reason why reporters of American newspapers and particularly of American TV stations more often than not start their interviews, after listing these facts, by exclaiming: “Dr. Frankl, your book has become a true bestseller—how do you feel about such a success?” Whereupon I react by reporting that in the first place I do not at all see in the bestseller status of my book an achievement and accomplishment on my part but rather an expression of the misery of our time: if hundreds of thousands of people reach out for a book whose very title promises to deal with the question of a meaning to life, it must be a question that burns under their fingernails.

To be sure, something else may have contributed to the impact of the book: its second, theoretical part (“Logotherapy in a Nutshell”) boils down, as it were, to the lesson one may distill from the first part, the autobiographical account (“Experiences in a Concentration Camp”), whereas Part One serves as the existential validation of my theories. Thus, both parts mutually support their credibility.

I had none of this in mind when I wrote the book in 1945. And I did so within nine successive days and with the firm determination that the book should be published anonymously. In fact, the first printing of the original German version does not show my name on the cover, though at the last moment, just before the book's initial publication, I did finally give in to my friends who had urged me to let it be published with my name at least on the title page. At first, however, it had been written with the absolute conviction that, as an anonymous opus, it could never earn its author literary fame. I had wanted simply to convey to the reader by way of a concrete example that life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones. And I thought that if the point were demonstrated in a situation as extreme as that in a concentration camp, my book might gain a hearing. I therefore felt responsible for writing down what I had gone through, for I thought it might be helpful to people who are prone to despair.

And so it is both strange and remarkable to me that—among some dozens of books I have authored—precisely this one, which I had intended to be published anonymously so that it could never build up any reputation on the part of the author, did become a success. Again and again I therefore admonish my students both in Europe and in America: “Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want

you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run—in the long run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had *forgotten* to think of it.”

The reader may ask me why I did not try to escape what was in store for me after Hitler had occupied Austria. Let me answer by recalling the following story. Shortly before the United States entered World War II, I received an invitation to come to the American Consulate in Vienna to pick up my immigration visa. My old parents were overjoyed because they expected that I would soon be allowed to leave Austria. I suddenly hesitated, however. The question beset me: could I really afford to leave my parents alone to face their fate, to be sent, sooner or later, to a concentration camp, or even to a so-called extermination camp? Where did my responsibility lie? Should I foster my brain child, logotherapy, by emigrating to fertile soil where I could write my books? Or should I concentrate on my duties as a real child, the child of my parents who had to do whatever he could to protect them? I pondered the problem this way and that but could not arrive at a solution; this was the type of dilemma that made one wish for “a hint from Heaven,” as the phrase goes.

It was then that I noticed a piece of marble lying on a table at home. When I asked my father about it, he explained that he had found it on the site where the National Socialists had burned down the largest Viennese synagogue. He had taken the piece home because it was a part of the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. One gilded Hebrew letter was engraved on the piece; my father explained that

this letter stood for one of the Commandments. Eagerly I asked, "Which one is it?" He answered, "Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land." At that moment I decided to stay with my father and my mother upon the land, and to let the American visa lapse.

VIKTOR E. FRANKL

Vienna, 1992

MAN'S
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EXPERIENCES IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP

THIS BOOK DOES NOT CLAIM TO BE an account of facts and events but of personal experiences, experiences which millions of prisoners have suffered time and again. It is the inside story of a concentration camp, told by one of its survivors. This tale is not concerned with the great horrors, which have already been described often enough (though less often believed), but with the multitude of small torments. In other words, it will try to answer this question: How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?

Most of the events described here did not take place in the large and famous camps, but in the small ones where most of the real extermination took place. This story is not about the suffering and death of great heroes and martyrs, nor is it about the prominent Capos—prisoners who acted as trustees, having special privileges—or well-known prisoners. Thus it is not so much concerned with the sufferings of the mighty, but with the sacrifices, the crucifixion and the deaths of the great army of unknown and unrecorded victims. It was these common prisoners, who bore no distinguishing marks on their sleeves, whom the Capos really despised. While these ordinary prisoners had little or nothing to eat, the Capos were never hungry; in fact many of the Capos fared better in the camp than they had in their entire lives. Often they were harder on the prisoners

than were the guards, and beat them more cruelly than the SS men did. These Capos, of course, were chosen only from those prisoners whose characters promised to make them suitable for such procedures, and if they did not comply with what was expected of them, they were immediately demoted. They soon became much like the SS men and the camp wardens and may be judged on a similar psychological basis.

It is easy for the outsider to get the wrong conception of camp life, a conception mingled with sentiment and pity. Little does he know of the hard fight for existence which raged among the prisoners. This was an unrelenting struggle for daily bread and for life itself, for one's own sake or for that of a good friend.

Let us take the case of a transport which was officially announced to transfer a certain number of prisoners to another camp; but it was a fairly safe guess that its final destination would be the gas chambers. A selection of sick or feeble prisoners incapable of work would be sent to one of the big central camps which were fitted with gas chambers and crematoriums. The selection process was the signal for a free fight among all the prisoners, or of group against group. All that mattered was that one's own name and that of one's friend were crossed off the list of victims, though everyone knew that for each man saved another victim had to be found.

A definite number of prisoners had to go with each transport. It did not really matter which, since each of them was nothing but a number. On their admission to the camp (at least this was the method in Auschwitz) all their documents had been taken from them, together with their other possessions. Each prisoner, therefore, had had an opportunity to claim a fictitious name or profession; and for various reasons many did

this. The authorities were interested only in the captives' numbers. These numbers were often tattooed on their skin, and also had to be sewn to a certain spot on the trousers, jacket, or coat. Any guard who wanted to make a charge against a prisoner just glanced at his number (and how we dreaded such glances!); he never asked for his name.

To return to the convoy about to depart. There was neither time nor desire to consider moral or ethical issues. Every man was controlled by one thought only: to keep himself alive for the family waiting for him at home, and to save his friends. With no hesitation, therefore, he would arrange for another prisoner, another "number," to take his place in the transport.

As I have already mentioned, the process of selecting Capos was a negative one; only the most brutal of the prisoners were chosen for this job (although there were some happy exceptions). But apart from the selection of Capos which was undertaken by the SS, there was a sort of self-selecting process going on the whole time among all of the prisoners. On the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who, after years of trekking from camp to camp, had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft, and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves. We who have come back, by the aid of many lucky chances or miracles—whatever one may choose to call them—we know: the best of us did not return.

Many factual accounts about concentration camps are already on record. Here, facts will be significant only as far as they are part of a man's experiences. It is the exact nature of these experiences that the following essay will attempt to describe. For those who have been inmates in a camp, it will attempt to

explain their experiences in the light of present-day knowledge. And for those who have never been inside, it may help them to comprehend, and above all to understand, the experiences of that only too small percentage of prisoners who survived and who now find life very difficult. These former prisoners often say, "We dislike talking about our experiences. No explanations are needed for those who have been inside, and the others will understand neither how we felt then nor how we feel now."

To attempt a methodical presentation of the subject is very difficult, as psychology requires a certain scientific detachment. But does a man who makes his observations while he himself is a prisoner possess the necessary detachment? Such detachment is granted to the outsider, but he is too far removed to make any statements of real value. Only the man inside knows. His judgments may not be objective; his evaluations may be out of proportion. This is inevitable. An attempt must be made to avoid any personal bias, and that is the real difficulty of a book of this kind. At times it will be necessary to have the courage to tell of very intimate experiences. I had intended to write this book anonymously, using my prison number only. But when the manuscript was completed, I saw that as an anonymous publication it would lose half its value, and that I must have the courage to state my convictions openly. I therefore refrained from deleting any of the passages, in spite of an intense dislike of exhibitionism.

I shall leave it to others to distill the contents of this book into dry theories. These might become a contribution to the psychology of prison life, which was investigated after the First World War, and which acquainted us with the syndrome of "barbed wire sickness." We are indebted to the Second World War for enriching our knowledge of the "psychopathology

of the masses” (if I may quote a variation of the well-known phrase and title of a book by LeBon), for the war gave us the war of nerves and it gave us the concentration camp.

As this story is about my experiences as an ordinary prisoner, it is important that I mention, not without pride, that I was not employed as a psychiatrist in camp, or even as a doctor, except for the last few weeks. A few of my colleagues were lucky enough to be employed in poorly heated first-aid posts applying bandages made of scraps of waste paper. But I was Number 119,104, and most of the time I was digging and laying tracks for railway lines. At one time, my job was to dig a tunnel, without help, for a water main under a road. This feat did not go unrewarded; just before Christmas 1944, I was presented with a gift of so-called “premium coupons.” These were issued by the construction firm to which we were practically sold as slaves: the firm paid the camp authorities a fixed price per day, per prisoner. The coupons cost the firm fifty pfennigs each and could be exchanged for six cigarettes, often weeks later, although they sometimes lost their validity. I became the proud owner of a token worth twelve cigarettes. But more important, the cigarettes could be exchanged for twelve soups, and twelve soups were often a very real respite from starvation.

The privilege of actually smoking cigarettes was reserved for the Capo, who had his assured quota of weekly coupons; or possibly for a prisoner who worked as a foreman in a warehouse or workshop and received a few cigarettes in exchange for doing dangerous jobs. The only exceptions to this were those who had lost the will to live and wanted to “enjoy” their last days. Thus, when we saw a comrade smoking his own cigarettes, we knew he had given up faith in his strength to carry on, and, once lost, the will to live seldom returned.



When one examines the vast amount of material which has been amassed as the result of many prisoners' observations and experiences, three phases of the inmate's mental reactions to camp life become apparent: the period following his admission; the period when he is well entrenched in camp routine; and the period following his release and liberation.

The symptom that characterizes the first phase is shock. Under certain conditions shock may even precede the prisoner's formal admission to the camp. I shall give as an example the circumstances of my own admission.

Fifteen hundred persons had been traveling by train for several days and nights: there were eighty people in each coach. All had to lie on top of their luggage, the few remnants of their personal possessions. The carriages were so full that only the top parts of the windows were free to let in the grey of dawn. Everyone expected the train to head for some munitions factory, in which we would be employed as forced labor. We did not know whether we were still in Silesia or already in Poland. The engine's whistle had an uncanny sound, like a cry for help sent out in commiseration for the unhappy load which it was destined to lead into perdition. Then the train shunted, obviously nearing a main station. Suddenly a cry broke from the ranks of the anxious passengers, "There is a sign, Auschwitz!" Everyone's heart missed a beat at that moment. Auschwitz—the very name stood for all that was horrible: gas chambers, crematoriums, massacres. Slowly, almost hesitatingly, the train moved on as if it wanted to spare its passengers the dreadful realization as long as possible: Auschwitz!

With the progressive dawn, the outlines of an immense camp became visible: long stretches of several rows of barbed

wire fences; watch towers; searchlights; and long columns of ragged human figures, grey in the greyness of dawn, trekking along the straight desolate roads, to what destination we did not know. There were isolated shouts and whistles of command. We did not know their meaning. My imagination led me to see gallows with people dangling on them. I was horrified, but this was just as well, because step by step we had to become accustomed to a terrible and immense horror.

Eventually we moved into the station. The initial silence was interrupted by shouted commands. We were to hear those rough, shrill tones from then on, over and over again in all the camps. Their sound was almost like the last cry of a victim, and yet there was a difference. It had a rasping hoarseness, as if it came from the throat of a man who had to keep shouting like that, a man who was being murdered again and again. The carriage doors were flung open and a small detachment of prisoners stormed inside. They wore striped uniforms, their heads were shaved, but they looked well fed. They spoke in every possible European tongue, and all with a certain amount of humor, which sounded grotesque under the circumstances. Like a drowning man clutching a straw, my inborn optimism (which has often controlled my feelings even in the most desperate situations) clung to this thought: These prisoners look quite well, they seem to be in good spirits and even laugh. Who knows? I might manage to share their favorable position.

In psychiatry there is a certain condition known as "delusion of reprieve." The condemned man, immediately before his execution, gets the illusion that he might be reprieved at the very last minute. We, too, clung to shreds of hope and believed to the last moment that it would not be so bad. Just the sight of the red cheeks and round faces of those prisoners was a

great encouragement. Little did we know then that they formed a specially chosen elite, who for years had been the receiving squad for new transports as they rolled into the station day after day. They took charge of the new arrivals and their luggage, including scarce items and smuggled jewelry. Auschwitz must have been a strange spot in this Europe of the last years of the war. There must have been unique treasures of gold and silver, platinum and diamonds, not only in the huge storehouses but also in the hands of the SS.

Fifteen hundred captives were cooped up in a shed built to accommodate probably two hundred at the most. We were cold and hungry and there was not enough room for everyone to squat on the bare ground, let alone to lie down. One five-ounce piece of bread was our only food in four days. Yet I heard the senior prisoners in charge of the shed bargain with one member of the receiving party about a tie-pin made of platinum and diamonds. Most of the profits would eventually be traded for liquor—schnapps. I do not remember any more just how many thousands of marks were needed to purchase the quantity of schnapps required for a “gay evening,” but I do know that those long-term prisoners needed schnapps. Under such conditions, who could blame them for trying to dope themselves? There was another group of prisoners who got liquor supplied in almost unlimited quantities by the SS: these were the men who were employed in the gas chambers and crematoriums, and who knew very well that one day they would be relieved by a new shift of men, and that they would have to leave their enforced role of executioner and become victims themselves.

Nearly everyone in our transport lived under the illusion that he would be reprieved, that everything would yet be well. We did not realize the meaning behind the scene that was to fol-