Prisoner B-3087

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALAN GRATZ

Gratz was born in Knoxville, Tennessee and attended the University of Tennessee to study creative writing. Initially, Gratz wrote plays, largely adapted from literature. Ten years after graduating, Gratz published his first novel for young readers, *Samurai Shortstop*. Since then, he has published 16 books for young readers, including several historical fiction works. Gratz also spent a period of time teaching historical fiction writing in Tokyo, Japan and Jakarta, Indonesia. He has also written magazine articles, a few television scripts, and more than 6,000 radio commercials. He currently lives with his wife and daughter in Asheville, North Carolina.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Prisoner B-3087 is based on the true story of Yanek Gruener's experience during the Holocaust—Nazi Germany's genocide of Jews and other marginalized peoples in Europe. Poland, where Yanek grew up, was one of the first places to experience the violence of the Holocaust, the country was invaded by the Nazis on September 1, 1939. After this invasion, the Jews were quickly separated into ghettos, including in Kraków, where Yanek lived. Soon after, concentration camps were built, where millions of Jews were worked to death or killed outright. In the book, Yanek survives 10 different concentration camps: Plaszów, the Wieliczka Salt Mines, Trzebinia, Birkenau, Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Gross-Rosen, and finally Dachau, before being liberated by American soldiers on April 29, 1945. All in all, six million Jews and millions of communists, homosexuals, and Roma people were killed by the Nazis. Three million of those six million Jews were Polish—over 90 percent of Poland's Jewish population. Of the 1.5 million Jewish children living in Europe before the war, only half a million survived—including Yanek.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

There are many examples of books that follow people's journeys during the Holocaust, both fictional and based on true stories. For nonfiction accounts, Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* are comparable autobiographies, focusing on the authors' journeys as young men through various concentration camps. Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* also recounts his experiences as a concentration camp prisoner, touching on similar themes of determination and finding meaning in the face of crisis and dehumanization. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is another famous work, as Anne Frank detailed her own experiences as a young Jewish girl hiding in her neighbor's home in the Netherlands in 1942 before being discovered by the Nazis. Simon Wiesenthal's memoirs also recount his experience as a survivor of five different concentration camps. For fiction, Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* focuses on a young Jewish girl fleeing Nazi Germany in hope of safety in Denmark. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne centers on a German and a Jewish child during the Holocaust as they forge a friendship on opposite sides of a concentration camp fence. Jane Yolen's novel *The Devil's Arithmetic* takes a different tack, focusing on a Jewish girl growing up in the 1980s who is sent back in time and experiences the Holocaust. Gratz has also written other young adult books that focus on children in times of war: *Grenade*, *Projekt 1065*, and *Refugee*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Prisoner B-3087
- **When Written:** 2012–2013
- **Where Written:** North Carolina
- **When Published:** March 1, 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult; Historical Fiction; Biographical Fiction
- **Setting:** Poland and Germany, 1939–1945
- **Climax:** Yanek is liberated from Dachau concentration camp.
- **Antagonist:** The Nazi regime
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Ruth's Truth. Jack Gruener's wife, Ruth, has also published a memoir about her time during the Holocaust, entitled *Destined to Live*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Prisoner B-3087 is based on the true story of Yanek Gruener, a young Jewish boy who is 10 years old when the Nazis invade his home city of Kraków, Poland in September 1939. Yanek, his parents Oskar and Mina, and the rest of his family, who are all Jewish, are immediately subjected to restrictions on their freedoms. A Jewish ghetto is created, and Jewish people are not allowed to go to school or to own business. Soon, Nazis start to raid their homes and deport citizens to camps—where it is rumored that Jewish people are killed. Oskar tries to stay optimistic, but Yanek grows increasingly worried. After a raid on their home, Yanek discovers a pigeon coop where he and his

family decide to live, hidden from the Nazis.

Three years into the Nazi occupation, Yanek turns 13, and his bar mitzvah ceremony (in which he becomes a man under Jewish law) is held under the cover of night in a basement—if Jews are discovered practicing their religion, they will be killed. Soon after this, Yanek's mother and father are picked up while waiting for their bread rations, and Yanek never sees them again. Soon after, in late 1942, Yanek is deported as well. He arrives at Plaszów concentration camp, where he reunites with his uncle Moshe. Moshe explains that Yanek has to remain anonymous and not stand out or care about anything, because anything can be used as a reason for the Nazis to kill prisoners. He insists that they have to survive at all costs, because they cannot let the Nazis erase them from history. Yanek soon gets an introduction to the Nazis' cruelty at his first roll call: the commandant at the camp, Amon Goeth, sics his dogs on the prisoner next to Yanek for no reason.

Moshe gets him Yanek a job cleaning the Kraków ghettos so that he can stay out of the camp as much as possible. This proves doubly lucky, as Yanek cleans out his family's old apartment and finds the money that his mother had sewn into their family's jackets. Yanek brings this money back to the camp, where Moshe is able to trade it for extra **bread**. Moshe tells him not to share it with anyone, though Yanek feels guilty about not sharing it with prisoners who have become "*Muselmanners*"—so skinny and dejected that they are essentially dead. Soon after Yanek acquires this extra money, however, Goeth murders Moshe because Moshe was assigned the leader of a group breaking rocks, and Goeth wasn't been satisfied with their work. Yanek is devastated, thinking that he is alone once again.

As the years go on, Yanek is transferred wherever work is needed: first, to the Wieliczka salt mine, and then to Trzebinia concentration camp. At each of these places, the work is grueling and death is commonplace—the Nazis treat the Jewish prisoners worse than animals. Yanek thinks about fighting back, but when one prisoner resists during roll call at Trzebinia, he is immediately shot—and seven other innocent prisoners, including a young boy, are hanged in front of the rest. Yanek vows to remember the boy. Soon after, in winter of 1944, Yanek and other prisoners are loaded into a train car, where they are taken to Birkenau concentration camp. Another prisoner explains that they are going to be taken to the gas chambers. Yanek is distraught, thinking that all his work to survive had been for nothing. But when they are herded into the showers, water comes out instead of gas. Yanek is so relieved that he feels as though he's been reborn. He is determined to continue to survive.

After the showers at Birkenau, Yanek's head is shaved and a **number** is tattooed on his arm: B-3087. He is a number to the Nazis, rather than an individual. He then finds a prison uniform and a pair of shoes that fit. That night, a prisoner asks if there are 10 men to perform a boy's bar mitzvah ceremony. Yanek volunteers, and when the ceremony is done, he echoes Moshe's words that they cannot let the Nazis erase them. Meanwhile, during his time at Birkenau, Yanek washes every day to remind himself of his humanity. He also learns how to gain some strength by holding back in line for soup, so that he's served the thicker part at the bottom. One day, prisoners try to break out, but they are caught and killed. The men on their work detail are also shot despite having done nothing wrong, and a guard opens fire on the remaining prisoners who are gathered for roll call—Yanek narrowly survives.

After a few months, Yanek is transferred to Auschwitz. There, despite Moshe's warnings, he befriends a boy named Fred, who is also from Kraków. Yanek is grateful to talk to someone else, and to talk about his life and what he had been through. One day, however, Fred grows very sick and is unable to work. When he is unable to get up for roll call, the Nazis drag him out of the barracks and hang him. Yanek makes another vow never to forget Fred. In the winter of 1945, Yanek is transferred to Sachsenhausen, but this time there are no cars to take them, and so they walk there for days on end. Yanek notices a boy who can barely keep himself upright. The boy reminds Yanek of Fred, and so he helps take the boy's weight as they walk. Later, another man helps Yanek carry the boy as well. When they stop for the night, Yanek realizes that in the process of carrying the boy, his bread portion fell out of his waistband. He nearly breaks down. He considers stealing from the boy but decides against it, thinking that the boy will likely die by the morning and that he can take the bread then. But the boy doesn't die, and so Yanek walks three more days without any food.

Arriving at Sachsenhausen, Yanek and the other prisoners are given a brief period of rest which allows them to regain a bit of strength. Yanek continues to wash at a pump every day, marveling that he once owned the luxury of a **toothbrush**. Sachsenhausen brings much of the same as the other camps, as Yanek and the others are forced to break rocks and build barracks. But Yanek can tell that the Allied planes are getting closer. Soon after, Yanek is shipped by cattle car to Bergen-Belsen. The conditions at this camp are surprisingly better: there are no gas chambers, and they have more food than Yanek has eaten in six years. But Yanek soon discovers that there is a kapo nicknamed Moonface (for the scars and acne pits on his round face) who targets Yanek for no reason, beating him up whenever he can. Despite the better conditions, Yanek works to make sure he is transferred to another camp as quickly as possible to avoid Moonface.

Yanek is then moved to Buchenwald, where the prisoners are treated as lower than animals. This comparison is easy to make: there's a zoo with wild animals at the camp which serves as entertainment for the guards in their families. The animals are fed better than the prisoners, though one day the Nazis drop a steak (normally fed to the bears) in front of two prisoners and

force them to fight for it. Yanek once sees two Nazi soldiers tie one of the deer to a fence; later, they are punished harshly for it. Yanek observes that the Nazis will hypocritically tolerate cruelty to the prisoners, yet not to animals.

Yanek is then transferred to Gross-Rosen. One day, a kapo asks where the missing top button on Yanek's shirt is. When Yanek says he doesn't know, he is punished with 20 lashes—though the Nazi soldier whipping him continually restarts the count until Yanek blacks out from receiving so many. That night, Yanek hears bombs explode close to their barracks, and hopes the Allies are near. The prisoners in Gross-Rosen are then sent on a death march to Dachau without any food—Yanek believes they are continuing to move because the Allies are getting closer and closer to liberating them. Their path to Dachau runs through Czechoslovakia, and Yanek is heartened to see that many Czech villagers have left bread and other food on their doorsteps for the prisoners. Still, Yanek knows that without more food, he will die very soon. He notices a kapo ahead with four loaves of bread—much more than the man needs for himself. When Yanek approaches the kapo, he realizes that it's Moonface. Despite his fear, Yanek approaches Moonface when they stop, explaining that he wants to work but needs food to live. Moonface, to Yanek's surprise, cuts off a piece of bread for him.

At Dachau, the explosions come closer and closer to the camps, and in early spring, the prisoners wake to find that the Nazis have fled in the night. They are unsure what to do with themselves, how they might get back to their homes, or what they would even go back to. But then, in April 1945, American soldiers arrive to liberate them, and Yanek falls to his knees, sobbing in relief that he survived the war. A soldier approaches Yanek, asks him his name, and assures him that everything is going to be all right.

The liberated prisoners are taken away from Dachau and housed temporarily in Munich. Yanek is amazed when the American soldiers give him a bunk to himself, sheets, a pillow, a cup, a washcloth, and especially a toothbrush. That night at dinner, another survivor cries as they all sit down to eat their meal. Yanek thinks that even though they are relieved to be free, there is an immense amount of sadness in remembering those that they had lost. However, Yanek soon discovers that his cousin Youzek also survived. Youzek suggests that Yanek apply to a new program in America that's helping Jewish orphans immigrate. After three years, Yanek's papers finally come through. As Yanek boards the train that will take him to a ship bound for the U.S., he thinks about his family. He knows he will always remember them, but that starting over in America will allow him to live his life again.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Yanek Gruener – Yanek is the protagonist of *Prisoner B-3087*. Yanek's story is based on the real Yanek (Jack) Gruener's experiences during World War II. When the story begins in 1939, Yanek is living with his parents Oskar and Mina in Kraków, Poland when the Nazis invade. Yanek subsequently endures deteriorating and inhumane conditions in the Kraków ghetto and 10 concentration camps prior to his liberation from Dachau concentration camps in 1945. From the outset of the war, Yanek learns key lessons that help him survive the Nazis' anti-Semitism and cruelty. First, he becomes incredibly mature, even as a young teenager, as he tries to protect his family and himself from the Nazis' wrath. Then, when his parents are taken to the concentration camps without him, Yanek becomes completely responsible for his own well-being, illustrating how the war causes him to grow up far earlier than he would have to otherwise. Once he is taken to the Plaszów concentration camp, he reunites with his Uncle Moshe, who teaches him how to survive inside the camps. Yanek learns to make himself anonymous and not stand out, so that the Nazis would not target him. This eradication of his identity becomes even more thorough when, at Birkenau, he is given a tattooed **number** (B-3087) in lieu of a name. Moshe also teaches him not to form connections with other prisoners, because looking out for oneself has to take precedence. But Yanek also recognizes, particularly after Moshe's death, the value in some relationships, understanding that mutual support can be a crucial buoy for the prisoners. Ultimately, Yanek's journey also illustrates how prisoners needed both determination and luck in order to survive. Yanek gets lucky at several junctures in his journey, but he also maintains his will to survive so that he can secure a life after the war. After the Americans liberate Yanek from Dachau concentration camp, Yanek's journey concludes with his setting out for America in pursuit of that new life, away from the horrors of what he has experienced.

Uncle Moshe – Moshe is Yanek's uncle and Oskar's brother. At the beginning of the book, Moshe lives in Kraków with the rest of Yanek's family. Unlike Oskar, Moshe is initially skeptical of the Nazis' new restrictive policies concerning Jewish people, which he fears will lead to an attempt to kill all European Jews. Moshe reunites with Yanek when Yanek arrives at Plaszów concentration camp, and the two work together to ensure that they can survive. Moshe makes it a priority to ensure that the Nazis will not erase Jews from history. Moshe teaches Yanek to remain anonymous, to blend in, and to not care about anything or anyone else—a person could be targeted for the smallest things. Moshe and Yanek also help each other in other ways: Moshe helps get Yanek assigned to jobs outside the camp, one of which jobs enables Yanek to return to the Kraków ghetto and find money that his mother, Mina, had sewn into their coat

linings. This enables Yanek and Moshe to trade the money for extra **bread**. One day, however, Moshe is reassigned to a job breaking rocks and is chosen to be the group leader. When Amon Goeth, the commandant of the camps, is dissatisfied with the group's work, he kills Moshe. This tragedy demonstrates that determination is not the sole determiner of survival—Moshe wanted to live just as much as Yanek did, but simple misfortune prevented him from surviving.

Fred – Fred is a boy about Yanek's age whom he befriends at Auschwitz. Though Yanek is wary of getting too close to another person because of the advice that Moshe gives him, Yanek finds comfort in talking about his family and his past life. Yanek and Fred discover that they grew up not too far from each other in Kraków, and they joke about the food they will buy as soon as they escape the camps. Fred's friendship illustrates how connection can be a salve for the Nazis' cruelty, and it spurs Yanek's determination to survive the war. One day, however, Fred grows ill, and over the next few days he becomes weaker and weaker until he can no longer stand to come to roll call. Despite Yanek's efforts to protect him, Fred is hanged at roll call. That night, Yanek vows never to forget his friend. Fred thus becomes another example of how Yanek's maturation comes with the burden of remembering those who could not survive the camps.

Oskar Gruener – Oskar is Yanek's father and Mina's husband. Unlike his brother Moshe, who is extremely ware of the Nazi occupation of Kraków, Oskar remains optimistic even as the Nazis take over and subject the Jews to worse and worse conditions. Oskar ensures that Yanek receives a bar mitzvah despite the fact that Jews are not allowed to practice and could be killed if they are caught. After the ceremony, he tells Yanek that the most important thing in life is to treat others well, placing his values in contrast with the Nazis' cruelty. Oskar is a role model for Yanek, but as the war continues on, Yanek starts to grow skeptical of his father's assertions. The more that Yanek doubts his father, the more he starts to take on responsibility for himself. This maturation proves crucially important when Oskar and Mina are taken to the concentration camps without Yanek, after which he never sees them again.

Mina Gruener – Mina is Yanek's mother and Oskar's wife. Like Oskar, Mina tries to remain optimistic as the Nazis take over Kraków and subject the Jews to worse and worse conditions. Yet Mina grows more and more desolate as the Nazis continue to violate the norms of their life. One day when Oskar is out, Nazi soldiers and a member of the *Judenrat* (Jewish police officers working with the Nazis) bang on their door. Yanek, fearful of what might happen if they do nothing, opens the door. The soldiers raid their apartment, taking Mina's wedding ring and the necklace from her neck. Mina is a thoughtful woman who cares deeply for her family: after this incident, she has the foresight to sew the family's remaining money into the linings of their coats. To console Mina, Yanek finds a pigeon coop for them to live in with a steel door that would prevent anyone from breaking in. Thus, Yanek starts to take on more and more responsibility for himself and switches roles with his parents. Soon after, Oskar and Mina are taken to the concentration camps without Yanek, and he never sees them again. Once Yanek is sent to the camps himself, he returns to the Kraków ghetto on a work assignment, and he's able to take the money Mina left and use it to buy **bread**. Mina's shrewd planning and intense love for her family thus plays a crucial role in enabling Yanek to survive, demonstrating the importance of strong connections with others.

Boy – Yanek meets this unnamed boy, who's around his age, on his first death march from Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen. The boy is weak and slowly starts to lag on their march. Yanek helps the boy by supporting some of his weight, thinking that he could easily be in the boy's position. His act of kindness and connection prompts further good deeds, as an old man comes to the boy's other side and takes some of his weight. But that evening, Yanek's humanity is tested: he finds that his **bread** fell out of his waistband while carrying the boy, and he deliberates stealing from the sleeping boy, even hoping that the boy might die so that Yanek can have his bread. This makes Yanek realize that the Nazis have taken away some of his compassion, and he affirms that he wants to hang on to his humanity and morals rather than resorting to wishing misfortune on others.

Moonface – Moonface is a kapo (a prisoner in charge of other prisoners) at Bergen-Belsen whose nickname refers to his round face plagued by acne pits and scars. Moonface targets Yanek specifically, beating him whenever he gets the chance. It is these actions that prompt Yanek to want to leave Bergen-Belsen, despite the overall conditions at the camp being relatively better than the other camps at which he's been imprisoned. Yanek meets Moonface again on his second death march from Gross-Rosen to Dachau. Moonface collects four loaves of **bread** along the way, and Yanek gathers up the courage to ask him for bread so that he can survive and continue to work. Moonface chooses to be merciful and gives Yanek a chunk of his bread, serving as an example of how both determination and sheer luck help Yanek to survive.

Amon Goeth – Goeth is the Nazi commandant at Plaszów concentration camp. Goeth is notorious for his cruelty, shooting Jewish prisoner at random in the parade grounds every morning. The first time Yanek goes to roll call, Goeth sics his dogs on the man standing beside Yanek, illustrating how random misfortune can take the life of any prisoner at any time. Goeth is responsible for the death of so many Jews that prisoners "keep score" to track how many he kills each day. Goeth is also responsible for the death of Yanek's uncle Moshe.

Thomas – Thomas is a boy in Yanek's barracks at Plaszów concentration camp. When Yanek discovers the crawlspace under the floorboard there, he shares this information with Thomas and another boy named Isaac. Yanek is glad to have

their company—not only for the ability to talk about themselves and their previous lives, but also because he feels that he is making a difference by helping them.

Isaac – Isaac is a boy in Yanek's barracks at Plaszów concentration camp. When Yanek discovers the crawlspace under the floorboard there, he shares this information with Isaac and another boy named Thomas. Yanek is glad to have their company—not only for the ability to talk about themselves and their previous lives, but also because he feels that he is making a difference by helping them.

Uncle Abraham – Abraham is Yanek's uncle and Oskar and Moshe's brother. Abraham and his wife, Fela, are allowed to continue making **bread** for the Nazis during the occupation of Kraków, but they also bake bread for Yanek and his family (and to sell to other families) under cover of night. They are taken to the camps before Yanek, where they are killed.

Aunt Fela – Fela is Yanek's aunt and Uncle Abraham's wife. Fela and Abraham are allowed to continue making bread for the Nazis during the occupation of Kraków, but they also bake bread for Yanek and his family (and to sell to other families) under cover of night. They are taken to the camps before Yanek, where they are killed.

Holtzman – Holtzman is a *Judenrat* (a Jewish police officer who works with the Nazis) in the Kraków ghetto who raids Yanek's apartment. Later, Yanek recognizes Holtzman as one of the prisoners he is working alongside in the Wieliczka salt mine. When other prisoners recognize him as well, they kill him by bashing his head in with a shovel, and they rub salt in his wounds.

Mrs. Immerglick – Mrs. Immerglick is a neighbor of Yanek's who lives in his apartment complex. Mrs. Immerglick and her family are taken to the concentration camps in a raid early on in the Nazi occupation of Kraków. Yanek reunites with Mrs. Immerglick after the war, and she tells him that his cousin Youzek has survived.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Youzek – Youzek is a cousin of Yanek's who also survives the war by hiding with friends. After the war, Yanek finds Youzek, who suggests that he go to America in order to start a new life, which Yanek does.

Mr. Tatarka – Mr. Tatarka is a neighbor of Yanek's who lives in his apartment complex. When Yanek returns to the Kraków ghetto to clean it as part of his duties at Plaszów, he discovers Mr. Tatarka's dead body in his apartment.

Aunt Gizela – Gizela is Yanek's aunt and Uncle Moshe's wife. She and her daughter Zytka volunteer for deportation from the Kraków ghetto in 1942, and they are killed at Plaszów concentration camp.

Zytka – Zytka is Yanek's cousin and Moshe and Gizela's daughter. She and her mother volunteer for deportation from the Kraków ghetto in 1942, and they are killed at Plaszów concentration camp.

Josef Mengele – Mengele is the Nazi commandant at Auschwitz. Mengele is was a real-life Nazi doctor who's infamous for the cruel experiments he performed on Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz.

Hela – Hela is Youzek's wife. She and Youzek survive the war by hiding with friends, and after the war, they are Yanek's only surviving family.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DETERMINATION AND LUCK

Prisoner B-3087 is a historical novel based on the true story of Jack Gruener, who is born Yanek Gruener. Yanek is a Jewish boy from Poland who, against all odds, survives the Kraków ghetto and 10 different concentration camps during the Holocaust between 1939 and 1945. This is a remarkable feat, as the Nazis' attempt to eliminate the Jewish people resulted in the deaths of 90 percent of Poland's Jewish population and six million Jews across Europe. Despite the fact that many prisoners share Yanek's perseverance in the camps in the face or horrific treatment, this alone is not enough to ensure survival—sheer luck also frequently helps Yanek to endure the cruelty of the camp. Thus, in Alan Gratz's writing of Yanek's story, he argues that two key factors enable people to survive trying situations: a combination of intense determination and extraordinary luck.

The overwhelming brutality in the concentration camps, particularly the ease with which the Nazis torture and murder the prisoners, emphasizes the fact that sometimes the prisoners' deaths are a result of the cruelest kind of bad luck. When Yanek arrives in his first concentration camp, Plaszów, in 1942, he receives an alarming introduction to the commandant of the camp, Amon Goeth. During Yanek's first roll call, for no reason at all, Goeth sets his two dogs on the prisoner standing directly beside Yanek. Another man is shot during the same roll call for not doffing his cap correctly. When Yanek returns from roll call, he feels as though he had "survived a battle." The Nazis are so uncaring about who lives or dies that anyone could be murdered at any time—only through sheer luck are people able to escape each day. This fact becomes particularly salient for Yanek when his uncle Moshe, who is also at Plaszów and helps him during his time in the camp, is killed by Goeth. Moshe had

been made a leader of a group breaking rocks in the camp, and when Goeth asked Moshe how much work had been done, Goeth "didn't like his answer." Even though Moshe had been just as determined to survive as Yanek, a simple mischance of being made the group leader led to his death.

Throughout his time at the camps, Yanek also receives several particularly lucky breaks which ensure his survival. When Yanek is at the Plaszów concentration camp, he is sent back to clean the Krakow ghetto, where his family used to live. He is then able to get back into his old apartment and find money that his mother, Mina, had sewn into his family's coats, as well as a pair of earrings. Through this lucky chance, he is able buy more **bread** for himself back at the camp, which is key to maintaining his strength and aiding his survival. After Yanek arrives at Birkenau in 1944, Yanek explains that he is "lucky to get a pair of wooden shoes that fit." Without this luck, he would not have been able to survive two subsequent death marches, as he describes how "Those without shoes were the first to fall behind and die." Again, the chance of getting shoes that fit enables Yanek to survive where others could not—highlighting how his survival frequently comes down to luck.

Yanek recognizes the tragedy in the reality that so much of one's survival in the camps comes down to luck, and this fills him with a deep sense of despair. But as his luck mounts, he understands that rather than resigning himself to death, he should maintain the determination and the hope to survive and make his efforts worthwhile. Yanek's despair peaks after surviving the ghetto and three concentration camps, only to be placed in the gas chambers at Birkenau. Yanek thinks, "There was no rhyme or reason to whether we lived or died [...] You could play the game perfectly and still lose, so why bother playing at all?" However, when Yanek and the other prisoners are in the showers, water comes out instead of deadly gas. Yanek laughs and cries, and for the first time thinks what will become the mantra for the rest of his journey: "I was alive." Recognizing his fortune in living fuels Yanek's determination to continue to survive—emphasizing the combination of luck and determination that allowed him to make it through the camps. Yanek also recognizes how a lack of determination can be just as much of a death sentence as being unlucky. He learns to identify "*Muselmanners*"—what the prisoners call people who have "no life in their expression," and have been "starved into a living death by [their] captors." When Yanek sees a *Muselmann*, he explains that he knows that they are soon to die: lacking the will to do anything essentially functions as a death sentence. Yanek thus recognizes that maintaining the will to live is crucial, and he continues to repeat, "I was alive," to motivate himself to survive. With this determination, Yanek is able to survive 10 different concentration camps and two death marches. When the Americans arrive to liberate Dachau in 1945, Yanek falls to his knees and weeps. Although Yanek has been lucky, it is also his perseverance and hope that enable him to build a new life after liberation.

Gratz resists the assumption that determination is all one needs to survive a life-or-death situation—to do so would be to discount all of those who shared the urgent will to live and yet by randomness and sheer bad luck were murdered by the Nazis while others were not. Still, Gratz ultimately suggests that while the prisoners may not have had complete control of their fate, maintaining the will to live remains indispensable. Determination may not guarantee success, but without it, it would have been impossible for Yanek to survive.

ANTI-SEMITISM AND CRUELTY VS. HUMANITY

Anti-Semitism is central to *Prisoner B-3087*, as it follows Jewish protagonist Yanek Gruener during the Holocaust, in which the Nazis targeted and systematically murdered Jewish people and other marginalized groups in Europe. As Gratz tracks Yanek's journey through the Kraków ghetto in Poland, as well as 10 different concentration camps, he illustrates how the Nazis used the prejudiced view that Jews were subhuman as a justification for unspeakable atrocities and cruelty. But more than that, Gratz also emphasizes how prisoners like Yanek truly felt less than human as a result: their lives were regarded as a game to the Nazis, and they were treated worse than animals. Thus, Gratz highlights how dehumanization can become a self-fulfilling prophecy: if one is treated as subhuman, it is easy to lose one's own sense of humanity.

As soon as the Nazis invade Poland, they separate the Jews from the rest of the Polish citizens and begin to treat them as less than others—all part of Hitler's plan to make the Jews "disappear from Europe." Yanek's uncle Moshe describes the new policies that the Nazis enact: "Jews must keep their heads down and not look Germans in the face. We can't speak unless spoken to. We can't walk on the main streets of our own city." Jews are also not allowed to go to school, Jewish businesses are closed, and they are given rations for food. Soon, a ghetto is built, and four families are forced to share a single flat. All of these discriminatory policies begin the slow separation of Jews from the norms of society; they are relegated to a lesser status by not being able to enjoy the freedoms of everyday life.

Yet these policies are nothing compared to the cruelty and abuse of the concentration camps, which serve to target, dehumanize, and ultimately kill the Jews. Three years after the Nazis invade Poland, Yanek is deported to a concentration camp called Plaszów, and he starts to observe the sheer brutality of the Nazis firsthand: the harsh working conditions, the scarcity of food, but mostly the violence and the lack of regard for their lives. There are daily beatings, torture, hangings, shootings, or even more brutal methods of death. On his first day in the camps, Yanek watches as Amon Goeth, the

commandant of the camp, sics his dogs on a man at roll call for no reason, yelling, "Attack! Attack! Kill the Jew!" Being relegated to subhuman status makes Jews completely disposable to the Nazis, and the prisoners see how much of a game their lives are in this setting. At Plaszów, they keep track of how many Jews Amon Goeth has killed each day by asking "what's the score?" and responding, "Goeth seven, Jews nil." The prisoners understand how much their lives are devalued by their captors—and how many of them become victims of this dehumanization every day.

Because the prisoners are treated like animals, in many ways they come to view themselves like animals and lose their humanity. When Yanek experiences both the physical and mental cruelty of the Nazi soldiers at Trzebinia, he realizes, "I was an animal to them, a pack mule. But beasts were never treated so poorly. Working animals were expensive. They had value. I was a Jew. We were lower than animals. They could kill as many of us as they wanted, and there would always be another trainload of us to take our place." In this quote, Yanek acknowledges that the Nazis value Jews' lives even less than those of animals, because they are seen as completely worthless and interchangeable. Yanek sees how this treatment turns people into animals when he observes a Nazi officer drop a piece of raw meat in the mud and tells two prisoners to fight for it. Yanek relays, "The SS officers laughed at them and hit them with clubs while the Jews scrambled in the mud for their dinner." The complete lack of humanity that the Nazi officers exhibit, and their dehumanization of the Jews, forces the prisoners to truly become animals towards one another in order to survive.

Yanek also understands how the destitute conditions make the Jews violent toward each other: like the two men fighting for the raw meat, Yanek even feels himself growing more desperate, reduced to primal desires. When Yanek is walking through his second death march, he helps carry another boy who is very ill. But when Yanek discovers that in the process, Yanek's **bread** portion has fallen out of his waistband, he considers stealing the bread from the sick boy—even hoping the boy might die before morning so Yanek can take his bread without guilt. But then Yanek reprimands himself for this hope: "What were the camps doing to me? What had the Nazis turned me into?" He sees how, facing desperation, he has lost some of the morality and humanity that once grounded him. He resolves to try to retain that humanity instead and does not wish the boy to die, but even his momentary lapse illustrates how the basic need to survive begins to outweigh the prisoners' humanity.

At the end of the book, when the Americans liberate Yanek and the other prisoners from Dachau in 1945, Gratz shows the converse of what has transpired in the camps. When the Jews are once again treated like human beings, they in turn are able to extend that humanity to each other. Yanek cries over the simple luxury of owning a **toothbrush** again. When having their first full meal—with forks, knives, and napkins—many of the survivors start to cry at returning to basic human decency. Yanek even asks a fellow survivor to "pass the salt," which prompts laughter. With this, Gratz demonstrates how simple human decency and gestures of kindness and just treatment can return humanity to those who have lost it.

CONNECTION VS. ISOLATION

One of the Nazis' primary tools of abuse, and one of the means by which they are able to maintain their power, is to make their victims feel completely isolated. Whether they do this by pulling families apart, punishing people for any connection, or quashing any perceived rebellion and punishing it tenfold, the Nazis use these isolating tactics as a means of instilling even more fear and despair in their victims. Yet while Yanek initially tries to isolate himself from other people in order to protect himself from the Nazis' wrath, he realizes that remaining connected can be crucial for his own and others' well-being. Thus, Gratz argues that banding together, even in small acts of kindness or connection, can be a lifesaving form of resistance.

Initially, Gratz highlights Yanek's isolation from those around him—both how the Nazis force him to feel isolated, and how he refuses to form connections because he recognizes the danger in doing so. When Yanek's parents are taken away to the concentration camps while he is left behind in Kraków, he reflects on how alone and weak he feels. He even briefly contemplates giving himself up to the Nazis, recognizing that he is only 13 and that he is "all alone in the world." Even though he ultimately decides not to give himself up, Gratz makes clear that Yanek's sense of isolation is debilitating almost to the point of despair. At Yanek's first concentration camp, Plaszów, he reunites with his uncle Moshe. But when he calls out to Moshe upon first seeing him, a Nazi soldier hearing his outburst immediately beats one of the other prisoners, not knowing who had called out. Gratz thus highlights how any connection to another person is punished. The Nazis are particularly brutal to any displays of solidarity among the prisoners that imply rebellion. At Trzebinia, Yanek thinks about fighting back against the Nazis so that he might be able to escape. When one man fights back against a Nazi soldier at roll call, Yanek thinks that this might be their chance, hoping that other prisoners will join in to fight. But instantly, the prisoner is shot, and seven other prisoners who had nothing to do with the man's outburst are hanged. Though Yanek thinks about finding strength in numbers, he realizes that any connection to another person could serve as a reason to be killed—and so Yanek at first tries to avoid any kind of relationship.

Yet as Yanek and his Uncle Moshe work together to improve their situation, Yanek realizes how connections can also help a person survive—even while Moshe emphasizes the need to

protect themselves and avoid associating with others. One day, Yanek is sent back to the Kraków ghetto to clean it, and he returns to his old apartment. There, he remembers that there are money and valuables sewn into the linings of his family's old coats, and he takes the money and valuables back to the ghetto. He shares this fortune with Moshe, who is able to trade the money for half a loaf of **bread** each, which Yanek explains is a feast. Only by working together are they able to obtain this life-saving food, illustrating the importance of their relationship to their mutual survival. Yet irony lies in the fact that after they buy the bread, Moshe insists that Yanek not share the bread with anyone else, and not even show others that he has this bread. Yanek feels guilty about doing so when he sees a man in another bunk who looks like he is about to die from starvation, but he does as he is told. The Nazis have made Yanek and Moshe incredibly fearful of relationships, even as Yanek recognizes the benefit of working together and his potential to save another person's life.

After Moshe's death in Plaszów, Yanek finds others to support and rely on. Even though he remembers Moshe's advice not to connect with others, he knows that doing so bolsters him. Soon after Moshe's death, Yanek feels his strength dwindling. He thinks, regarding Moshe, "Why did you have to die? I need help. I need a friend." Then, Yanek discovers a crawl space under the floorboards in the barracks and decides to hide rather than going to his work detail. He shows two other boys in his barracks, Thomas and Isaac, the crawl space as well. He's unsure why he does so, positing, "Maybe it was because I'd wanted someone to help me when I had needed it. Maybe it was just that I would be lonely in there all day." Regardless of the reason, hiding with the two other boys helps them to regain their strength, and they talk about the lives they used to have—helping them connect to one another and fueling their desire to survive and return to normal life. Two years and four concentration camps later, at Auschwitz, Yanek meets another boy his age named Fred, whom he befriends on their work detail. They talk about what they're going to do when they get out of the camps, and Yanek describes how he loves "just talking again. Being human." Even though Fred dies soon after—he is killed for being sick and unable to work—having a friend spurs Yanek's own will to survive and get out of the camps, and it briefly remedies his isolation.

Even though the Nazis prevent the prisoners from launching a full-scale rebellion, over time Yanek discovers subtle ways to resist the isolation that the Nazis try to impose on the prisoners. Yanek is even able to forge friendships, despite the fact that so many people prioritize only saving themselves and fear contact with others. These connections, Gratz illustrates, are part of the reason that Yanek is able to survive, both because those relationships can provide tangible physical support (like Moshe's bread), and because they provide an emotional buoy that helps Yanek to survive (like Fred's friendship).

COMING OF AGE, TRAUMA, AND REMEMBRANCE

Prisoner B-3087 follows Yanek from the time he is 10 years old, living in Kraków, Poland, to the time when he is liberated at Dachau at 16 years old. In those six years, Yanek experiences a great deal of trauma: the loss of his family, the abuse of 10 different concentration camps, the constant threat of death, and the genocide of the Jewish people. Gratz illustrates how, because of this trauma, Yanek is forced to grow up and take on a much greater amount of responsibility for himself and others. In addition, Yanek feels a responsibility born of his continued survival: to make it to adulthood so that he might carry on the memory of those who have been lost. Through Yanek's experience, Gratz ultimately argues that for people growing up in a traumatizing setting, coming of age is not only something one undergoes at a much more rapid pace than one would have otherwise—it also carries with it a mandate to remember those who could not live out the full extent of their lives.

Gratz illustrates how, when the Nazis first invade Poland, Yanek starts to grow up and take responsibility for his own survival—and even for that of his family. While Yanek initially relies on his father, Oskar, for leadership and comfort, two years into the Nazi's occupation of Kraków, he starts to grow doubtful of his father's constant optimism. In 1941, at 12 years old, Yanek begins to take responsibility for his family's well-being. One day, when Oskar is out, German soldiers and the *Judenrat* (Jews put in charge of other Jews in the ghetto) storm into Yanek's building and demand they open the door. When none of the adults in the room move out of fear, Yanek lets them into the apartment to avoid punishment. Later, he also finds a pigeon coop on their roof for his family to live in, so that they can have more protection from the soldiers. In all of these instances, Yanek takes on the role of an adult, spurred by the feeling that he needs to protect his family. When Yanek turns 13, he becomes a man under Jewish law, and he, his father, and a few other men hold his bar mitzvah under cover of night. However, later, when Yanek and his family are hiding in the pigeon coop, his uncle Moshe tells him, "You're still a boy, Yanek, even if you've had your bar mitzvah," and he argues that they should go outside so that the Nazis don't find them hiding and kill them. Yanek replies that if they leave the coop, they will certainly be killed, but if they hide, they might be spared. His logic gradually sways all of the adults, even Moshe. Thus, Yanek proves that while turning 13 does not necessarily make one an adult, being able to take responsibility for one's family and to protect them in the face of danger certainly fosters one's wisdom and maturity.

Yanek matures even more in the concentration camps. There, he starts to recognize that being forced to grow up has been a

traumatic experience, but also one that affords him the ability to remember those whose lives have been cut short. Yanek's parents are taken to the concentration camps before he is, causing him to be completely responsible for himself at a young age. He thinks, "I was thirteen years old, and my parents were gone. I was all alone in the world, but I would survive on my own." The fact that Yanek no longer has his parents to protect him is in itself a trauma that causes him to grow up much earlier than he would have otherwise. Yanek is taken to the camps soon after his parents, where he is reunited with his uncle Moshe but learns that the rest of his family is likely dead. As he experiences firsthand the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis, Yanek starts to recognize how his survival is necessary for the remembrance of the Jews. Moshe tells him, "Survive at all costs, Yanek. We cannot let these monsters tear us from the pages of the world." After Moshe's own death, Yanek takes this advice to heart even further. Being alone in the world comes with a certain despair, but Yanek reiterates the need to survive so that he can honor the memory of those who have died. By the time Yanek is liberated from Dachau, he is 16 years old, and the trauma and abuse that he has survived continues to illuminate the necessity of remembering those who did not make it out. When Yanek has his first meal after escaping, he thinks about the people that he watched die and the family members he has lost: "They filled my table and the tables all around me, taking the places of all the real people in the room. The dead would always be with me, I knew, even when I was surrounded by life again, even if the Americans gave me back all the objects I had lost." Yanek now has the emotional maturity that only comes with deep, unimaginable loss, and he understands how he will always carry the burden of that loss with him in remembering the dead.

Gratz opens the book with this passage: "If I had known what the next six years of my life were going to be like, […] I would have played more. Laughed more. I would have hugged my parents and told them I loved them." This is an interesting stylistic choice, as it implies that Yanek is retelling the story from the future—in which he already knows what is going to happen to him. This structure foreshadows the maturity that he has gained and the trauma he has endured. The opening sentences also imply that the book serves not only to detail those traumas and his coming of age, but also to document the memories of the people that he has lost.

IDENTITY VS. ANONYMITY

Central to *Prisoner B-3087* is the loss of identity—it is even inherent in the title. Yanek's journey through concentration camps strips him of all indications of identity and relegates him to a **number**. While this number is forced onto him by the Nazis, he must also adopt anonymity in order to avoid standing out and risking death. Yet this lack of identity comes at a cost: as Yanek and his fellow prisoners loses all individuality, all desires, and all family, they lose everything that makes life valuable and worthwhile. Thus, Gratz illustrates how anonymity can be just as damaging as other, more overt forms of abuse: without an identity or anything to care about, life quickly becomes meaningless.

Gratz sets up Yanek's individuality in the early chapters, illustrating the things that make him unique as a means of foreshadowing what he will soon lose. Yanek loves movies—particularly American Westerns—and he uses a slide projector to tell stories with pictures or shadow puppets. He's particularly upset, then, when the movie theaters become closed to Jews. The closures remove the things that Yanek particularly cares about, and this starts to strip him of his identity. These closures occur in school as well: Yanek explains that he loves books and science, and so unlike other children, he is disappointed when he learns that the schools are now closed to Jews. Yanek describes himself, even at 10 years old, as "depressed" after discovering the news. His desires and his ability to pursue his passions are deeply tied to his ability to find meaning in life, and Gratz here sets up the relationship between the loss of these parts of Yanek's identity and his inability to find meaning. When Yanek tells his parents about school being cancelled and Moshe grows more and more alarmed about restrictions on the Jews, Oskar provides them with this assurance: "Let them take everything. They cannot take who we *are*." This statement, while optimistic, only highlights the later tragedy of Yanek's loss of identity. To Yanek's father, identity feels like the last stronghold in one's life, reinforcing the idea that when identity is lost, it almost amounts to a physical loss of life.

Yanek starts to feel his identity taken away from him when he arrives at Plaszów concentration camp, illustrating how the removal of identity is just another aspect of the Nazis' torture as they try to dehumanize their prisoners. Yanek's clothing is the first aspect of the removal of his identity: he is dressed in a grey striped prison uniform, his other clothing taken away. From this point on, he's no longer an individual—instead, he has simply been reduced to a category: prisoner. Likewise, he is given a Star of David to denote that he is a Jew. But even though this is a distinct part of Yanek's identity, it is not the whole of his identity. Later, Yanek's head is shaved, removing another layer of individuality. The Nazis' tactics here all serve to take away Yanek's individuality, so that he becomes nothing but a type to his captors. When Moshe is reunited with Yanek in Plaszów, Moshe emphasizes the need to play into anonymity. He warns, "From now on, you have no name, no personality, no family, no friends. Do you understand? Nothing to identify you, nothing to care about. Not if you want to survive. You must be anonymous to these monsters." Moshe recognizes that anonymity is necessary to survival, but that this potential for survival comes at the cost of losing everything that makes a person who they are. When Yanek arrives in Birkenau, he is

given a tattooed number in place of a name: B-3087. He thinks, "That was the mark they put on me, a mark I would have for as long as I lived. B-3087. That was who I was to them. Not Yanek Gruener, son of Oskar and Mina. Not Yanek Gruener of 20 Krakusa Street, Podgórze, Kraków. Not Yanek Gruener who loved books and science and American movies." Again, Yanek emphasizes that everything that made him who he is has been taken away, symbolized by this impersonal identification number.

It is only when the Americans liberate Dachau that Yanek's identity is restored to him. Alongside his freedom, this allows Yanek to regain a sense of meaning in life as he reconnects with family and former passions. When the Americans arrive in Dachau, one rushes over to Yanek to help him. The first thing the soldier asks Yanek is his name. When Yanek affirms his name, the soldier replies, "Everything's going to be all right now, Yanek." Yanek, in turn, thinks, "for the first time in six years, I believed he was right." This acknowledgement of an identity outside of Yanek's prisoner number symbolizes that his individuality and ability to have a meaningful future have been restored to him. This idea is further reinforced when Yanek returns to society. He reunites with a cousin, Youzek, who provides him once more with the comfort of having a family—of feeling that someone knows him and loves him. Yanek also thinks of getting a job as a projectionist in a nearby movie theater before deciding to move to America, a fantasy of his prior to the war. Yanek acknowledges to himself that "life must go on," and now that he is regaining aspects of his identity, he is able to pursue that meaning once more.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BREAD

Bread symbolizes the increasingly desperate conditions Yanek faces as he's oppressed by the Nazi regime, as well as his unyielding will to survive and retain his humanity. Prior to the Nazi invasion of Kraków, food is something that Yanek takes for granted. Even after the Nazis invade, when Yanek's uncle Abraham saves bread for his family, Yanek explains that even though he is hungry, he can still get a deep pleasure from the smell of warm, fresh-baked bread. Yanek is learning to appreciate what he has, and the bread also is deeply tied to the comfort of family. But after Yanek is taken to the concentration camps, food grows scarcer and scarcer as life gets more and more difficult. The bread he is given is described as "small," "hard," "tasteless" and "lice-ridden." While half a loaf was once considered meager, Yanek now thinks of it as a "feast." This mirrors how the conditions in Yanek's own life have deteriorated, as his entire experience has become similarly destitute and devoid of pleasure.

After a death march, in which Yanek has been supporting a boy about his age, he notices that his bread fell out of his pants. The boy's bread, however, is still there, and Yanek thinks about stealing it. He doesn't want to steal it from a living boy, however, and so he fleetingly hopes that the boy might die so that he can have his bread. But then he realizes how horrific this thought is: he has been reduced to desperation. He does not take the bread—though he knows that it fuels his life and his will to live. Thus, bread ultimately represents Yanek's refusal to surrender what makes him human—his morality, empathy, and higher reasoning—even in the face of unthinkably traumatic circumstances.

YANEK'S NUMBER

Yanek's number, B-3087, represents the erasure of his identity. Yanek receives his number at Birkenau concentration camp (hence the B), and it is tattooed into his skin. From then on, Yanek is identified only by this number. He recognizes that this serves as the loss of not only his name, but the things that make him an individual person. Yanek describes how he is "Not Yanek Gruener who loved books and science and American movies"—instead, he's merely Prisoner B-3087 to the Nazis. Yanek's number thus emphasizes how each prisoner is viewed only a Jew, essentially indistinguishable from one another.

But the number represents a loss of individuality on a deeper level. Yanek is hesitant to tell his real name to other prisoners in the camps, because he worries that any connection to another person could catch the attention of the Nazis. He thinks, "I had to be anonymous. I had to be no one, with no name, no personality, and no family or friends to care about." The number accomplishes this, serving as a means of eradicating not only a person's identity, but also anything that brings meaning to their lives. The end of the book, by contrast, shows Yanek regaining that identity. When he and the other prisoners are liberated from Dachau by American soldiers, one soldier asks him his name. In tears, Yanek tells him his name, revealing it for the first time in years. This symbolizes his return to his identity and individuality, as his number no longer defines him.

TOOTHBRUSHES

Toothbrushes symbolize Yanek's sense of humanity. In the camps, Yanek and the other prisoners do not have toothbrushes or toothpaste. Yanek recognizes that he does not truly need this to survive, but that toothbrushes are representative of a basic level of decency that the Jews are not shown. When he washes himself in the morning, he rubs his teeth with his wet fingers, thinking that "it felt important to remember what it was like to be human." He thinks as he

washes one day that the simplest possessions, like toothbrushes, "seem[] like treasures now." Yanek desperately wants to keep hold on the feeling of what it was like to be treated well, in the hopes that he can one day regain that decency. At the end of the novel, when the Americans liberate Yanek and the others from Dachau, he is relocated to Munich and is given a bunk with pillows and sheets, along with a cup, a washcloth, and a toothbrush. Yanek is astounded and holds it "reverently." He thinks, "the Americans [are] giving me my life back." Through all of the cruelty and inhumanity, the toothbrush serves as a small tool by which he can regain some of the humanity of which he had been deprived.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scholastic edition of *Prisoner B-3087* published in 2013.

Chapter 1 Quotes

If I had known what the next six years of my life were going to be like, I would have eaten more. I wouldn't have complained about brushing my teeth, or taking a bath, or going to bed at eight o'clock every night. I would have played more. Laughed more. I would have hugged my parents and told them I loved them. But I was ten years old, and I had no idea of the nightmare that was to come. None of us did.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Mina Gruener, Oskar Gruener

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This quote opens *Prisoner B-3087*, with Yanek acquainting the reader with his typical routine at 10 years old: spending time with his family and friends, brushing his teeth and taking a bath, and going to sleep early. Yet the quote also foreshadows the horrific events of the book to follow, referencing "the nightmare that was to come." In this way, the passage is notable stylistically, as it implies that Yanek is narrating from a future time in which he knows what is going to happen to him. By contrast, most of the plot is not narrated from this lens, but is narrated as though Yanek is experiencing the events of these six years in real time.

After reading the entirety of the book, this stylistic departure becomes ominous: it reflects how Yanek's journey and hardships have made him much mature beyond his years. No longer would he ever complain about brushing his teeth or taking his parents for granted, because soon he will lack these basic aspects of his life and his identity while he's imprisoned in concentration camps. The fact that he mentions brushing his teeth is particularly notable considering the importance that he will bestow upon a toothbrush later, as a symbol of basic human decency and hygiene. Thus, the opening lines foreshadow the coming-of-age story that will occur in the following pages, as Yanek is forced to grow up very quickly in the face of trauma.

Chapter 2 Quotes

My father reached up to hold my mother's hand. "We must not lose faith, Moshe."

"See how easy it is to keep your faith when the Nazis take it away along with everything else," Moshe told him.

My father smiled. "Let them take everything. They cannot take who we are."

Related Characters: Uncle Moshe, Oskar Gruener, Yanek Gruener (speaker), Mina Gruener

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

After the Nazis invade Kraków, life quickly becomes very different for the Jewish people living there, Yanek's family among them. Yanek and other Jewish children are not allowed to go to school anymore; Jewish people are not allowed to go to the movies, library, or swimming pool; they're are not allowed to keep businesses and instead are given rations for food; and they're not allowed out of their homes after curfew. Yanek's Uncle Moshe and Yanek's parents get into an argument about these restrictions, as Moshe becomes more and more alarmed while Oskar tries to remain optimistic.

This exchange is important in two ways: first, it acknowledges the anti-Semitism and the dehumanization that the Nazis are inflicting upon the Jewish people of Poland. This is what is motivating the conflict, and the policies are a means of making the Jews lesser than other Polish citizens and restricting their basic human freedoms. Gratz implies through Moshe's argument that it is hard to keep faith, and to feel like a human being, when policies are instated that inherently render a person as subhuman.

Additionally, while Oskar's argument is a hopeful one, it

foreshadows the fact that the Nazis will try to (and often succeed at) at taking away Jewish people's identities and individuality. Moshe and Yanek experience this themselves when they end up at Plaszów concentration camp together, as they recognize that they have to remain anonymous and not care about anything in order to survive—even though this largely robs life of its meaning.

Chapter 3 Quotes

He was my father, and I wanted to believe him, but I wasn't so sure anymore. It was January 1941. The Germans ruled Kraków. I was twelve years old. And for the first time in my life, I had begun to doubt my father.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Oskar Gruener

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Two years into the Nazi occupation of Kraków, Yanek is 12 years old. He observes as the Nazis start to build a wall to create a ghetto around his family's neighborhood, using the Jewish people to perform their labor. All of this is a part of the Nazis specific targeting of the Jewish people; Gratz highlights their anti-Semitism as they continue to systematically separate Jews from the other Polish people and to abuse them.

Yanek's father, however, assures Yanek that he should remain hopeful that the war will be over soon. Yanek's reaction to Oskar's optimism illustrates a turning point for Yanek in his coming of age. Earlier in the chapter, Gratz recounts how all Yanek wants to do is go out and play, affirming that he is still a young, innocent boy who wants to be carefree and who is still able to envision the idea of play. Yet here, Gratz also highlights how Yanek is starting to grow up. In observing the crisis surrounding his family and the Jewish people as a whole, Yanek is becoming privy to the darker aspects of the Germans' motivations. This, in turn, prompts him to become more and more skeptical of his father's thinking. While Yanek wants to remain optimistic, the injustice of what is happening to the Jews causes him to doubt his father for the first time—an indication of greater maturity and of his ability to think, act, and take responsibility for himself.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"Mama," I said, "if we don't open up they'll shoot us!"
My mother stared at the door. None of the other parents made a move.
I had to do something. I hurried to the door and unlocked it, and a German officer and a Judenrat police officer pushed past me down the hall.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Holtzman, Oskar Gruener, Mina Gruener

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

One day at the beginning of 1942, a German soldier and *Judenrat* (a Jewish police officer working with the Nazis) named Holtzman break into Yanek's apartment building while Oskar is out waiting in line for rations. They bang on the door of their apartment, threatening to break it down if the Grueners won't open it. Yanek's mother, Mina, freezes, as do the other adults living in their apartment—but Yanek decides that it would be better to open the door and let the officers in, in order to avoid punishment.

This action serves as another benchmark in Yanek's maturity: faced with a dangerous situation, Yanek is forced to spring into action in the place of his father and to make a decision that might save his and others' lives. This is a major role reversal between Yanek and his parents, one that continues after the two officers raid the apartment. Yanek later finds a pigeon coop for his family to live in, where they can put steel bars on the doors to prevent people from barging in. After this discovery, he comforts Mina by assuring her that no one will ever be able to break in again. Thus, Yanek takes on the role of the protector in place of his parents, prompted by the trauma and the cruelty of the Nazi regime.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"Yanek, my son," he said, looking at me solemnly, "you are a man now, with all the duties of an adult under Jewish law. You are now responsible for your own sins, but also for your own goodness. Remember what the Talmud teaches: Life is but a river. It has no beginning, no middle, no end. All we are, all we are worth, is what we do while we float upon it—how we treat our fellow man. Remember this, and a good man you will be."

Related Characters: Oskar Gruener (speaker), Yanek

Gruener

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46-47

Explanation and Analysis

When Yanek turns 13, Oskar, several members of Yanek's family, and a few other men that Yanek doesn't know gather for his bar mitzvah—the ceremony by which a boy becomes a man under Jewish law. They assemble under cover of night in a warehouse basement, knowing that they could be killed for practicing their religion and being out after curfew. At the end of the ceremony, Oskar provides Yanek with this advice. Oskar's speech touches on several themes within the book: first, it is a reminder that Yanek's Judaism is a deeply rooted part of his identity. Even though the people living in the ghetto have been reduced to their Jewish identity by the Nazis, they have still been deprived of the ability to practice. Yet in the speech, Oskar's father makes clear that that identity provides them with meaning and a means of understanding what is happening in the world.

Second, Yanek's bar mitzvah signifies a step in Yanek's coming of age. The ceremony means that Yanek now carries more responsibility for himself, and more than many other 13-year-olds, Yanek is painfully aware of the ways in which he is more mature and responsible. Because of the difficulties of the Nazi occupation, Yanek feels responsibility for his parents and the rest of his family, and takes the need to protect them onto himself. And lastly, Oskar's advice reminds Yanek of the necessity of maintaining one's humanity, even in times of great struggle. This will become key as Yanek faces horrific conditions in the concentration camps at the hands of the Nazis. But even when he feels dehumanized himself, Yanek recognizes the need to extend humanity toward others, embodying the wisdom his father imparts here.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"Yanek speaks with the wisdom of the prophet Isaiah," he said softly, then quoted, "'Come, my people…and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the wrath is past.'" He cleared his throat and looked around. "Mina and I are staying too."

One by one, the others agreed, until even Uncle Moshe sat down and was quiet.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Uncle Moshe, Mina Gruener

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of 1942—over two years into the Nazi occupation of Kraków, Poland—the Nazis ask for 7,000 Jewish volunteers to be deported from the ghetto, presumably to labor camps. When no volunteers appear, the Nazis announce that they will liquidate the entire ghetto if they do not have enough people. Yanek and his family, who are hiding out in a pigeon coop, argue about what to do. Yanek argues that they should stay, and though his Uncle Moshe is initially argumentative, Yanek is able to convince the others to remain in hiding as well.

This is yet another turning point in Yanek's coming-of-age journey. Having experienced fear, hunger, and the threat of death for more than two years at this point places extra responsibility and maturity onto Yanek, but this is another step in his development. He is able to appreciate the gravity of the situation, but he is also able to stand up for his own ideas in the face of much older adults, and he articulate his plan in such a way that the others agree with him. This ends up being a lifesaving action for Yanek and for some of the others (at least in this moment): the Nazis do not end up liquidating the ghetto, so those who do end up volunteering are sent to the concentration camps unnecessarily. This illustrates another role reversal between Yanek and his parents, wherein Yanek is taking on the responsibility for protecting the rest of his family. Without the constant present danger to their lives, Yanek would not have had to do so, further reinforcing how trauma can greatly accelerate a child's coming of age.

Chapter 8 Quotes

In the place of my pain, I felt the stirring of determination.

I would not give up. I would not turn myself in. No matter what the Nazis did to me, no matter what they took from me, I would survive.

I was thirteen years old, and my parents were gone.

I was all alone in the world, but I would survive on my own.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Mina Gruener, Oskar Gruener

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

One day, when Yanek is 13 years old, he comes home to discover that his parents have been deported to the concentration camps. At first, overcome with despair, Yanek considers giving himself up to the Nazis as well, but then he resolves to persevere in the face of the torment that they are imposing on him.

Here, Yanek touches on two important themes in the novel: coming of age in the face of trauma, and Yanek's intense determination. First, losing one's parents, and the protection and security that they afforded Yanek, is in and of itself a trauma. Yanek is now completely responsible for himself, and that has caused him to mature much faster than he would have had to otherwise. This maturity is clear when Yanek considers turning himself in to try to reunite with his parents, a decision that he knows could spell his death. But he ultimately recognizes that his parents would want him to try to escape this horror for as long as possible. Pondering this choice illustrates Yanek's wisdom, as the decision is a grave one. Yanek also makes it clear that he recognizes his need to survive in the face of a regime that is trying to get rid of him, his family, and the Jewish people as a whole: his ability to survive fulfills an obligation to the people who could not.

This leads Yanek to resolve to keep surviving, a necessary determination that will stay with him throughout the rest of the book as he, too, is taken to the concentration camps. Even though Yanek will need luck to survive 10 concentration camps, keeping his determination alive is also necessary to his survival as well, and this incident is a large source of that determination.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ "Yanek, we haven't much time," he whispered. "Listen closely. Here at Plaszów, you must do nothing to stand out. From now on, you have no name, no personality, no family, no friends. Do you understand? Nothing to identify you, nothing to care about. Not if you want to survive. You must be anonymous to these monsters. Give your name to no one. Keep it secret, in here," Uncle Moshe said, tapping his heart with his fist.

Related Characters: Uncle Moshe (speaker), Yanek Gruener

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

When Yanek is sent to the Plaszów concentration camp, he is reunited with his Uncle Moshe. On the first day that Yanek is there, Moshe gives him crucial advice as to how to survive in the concentration camps. First, Moshe's advice emphasizes the fact that Yanek must relinquish his identity—only anonymity will allow him to survive. In this way, Yanek can survive because he won't stand out, but there is an inherent hardship in this choice. In forcing oneself to become "no one," it means giving up everything that makes life meaningful. Thus, the lack of identity forced on the prisoners by the Nazis—and the fact that they also have to choose anonymity in order to survive—is as much a part of the torture that the prisoners endure as any other form of abuse.

Additionally, Moshe's advice underscores the idea that Yanek must isolate himself from others in order to survive as well, because any connection to another person can also make him stand out and can thus incur the Nazis' wrath. Yet even though Yanek understands this, there is an inherent paradox in what Moshe is saying. Yanek and Moshe rely on each other, in this moment and throughout their time at Plaszów. Thus, this ultimately leads Yanek to realize that small connections with other people can be helpful, and can even make a lifesaving difference.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ But no matter how he was standing, you always knew a Muselmann from his eyes. There wasn't anything left there. Muselmanners had given up, and there was no life in their expression, no spark of a soul. They were zombies, worked and starved into a living death by our captors. If the man below me wasn't dead when they came for us tomorrow, the morning roll call would kill him.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Mina Gruener, Uncle Moshe

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Yanek returns from the Kraków ghetto having sewn into his clothes the money his mother, Mina, had hidden away. Moshe trades some of this money for extra bread and instructs Yanek not to share it with anyone. That night, Yanek eats his bread in silence, despite knowing that the

man below him, a *Muselmann*, desperately needs it.

Yanek narrates how the prisoners know a person is a *Muselmann*: this description is Gratz's means of arguing how imperative determination is in order for the prisoners to survive. Yanek explains that all of the prisoners are starving, only skin and bones. But the difference between himself and the *Muselmann* is found in the eyes—which is really to say, in their demeanor. Without the "spark of a soul" that Yanek describes, they are as good as dead. Thus, Gratz suggests that even though luck is a major part of determining whether a person survives the camps, without determination, a person is as good as gone.

This night will also haunt Yanek as, on Moshe's advice, he refuses to share his bread even though he knows it could save the man's life. Bread is integral to the prisoner's health, and the abundance and quality of bread is an ongoing symbol of their wellbeing—which is why Yanek's support could be lifesaving. Yanek chooses not to share his bread, however. This is a decision that will plague him going forward when he ultimately realizes the need to connect with other prisoners, because they can help one another survive.

❝ We were going to survive, the two of us. We were going to survive—the last two men in the Gruener family written on the pages of the world.

Now there was only me. Yanek. I was fourteen years old, and I was alone in the world again. This time for good.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Amon Goeth, Uncle Moshe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

One day, when Yanek returns from his work detail, he discovers that Moshe had been killed by Amon Goeth after being reassigned to work inside the camp for the day. Moshe's death is devastating to Yanek, and he expresses his desolation and loneliness here. This quote illustrates many of the different facets of Yanek and Moshe's relationship, and how each of them buoyed Yanek's determination. Having a connection with someone else helped motivate him to survive, and they helped each other press on at different times. Moshe also represented a tie to the identity that Yanek has had to give up, as a member of the Gruener family. Moshe knew Yanek before the camps, and without him, Yanek feels that he has lost yet another connection to that past life.

In some ways, Moshe also fulfilled a kind of parental role for Yanek, looking out for his nephew and teaching him how to survive in the camps. This shifted some of the weight of responsibility off of Yanek. Yet now, this is yet another trauma in the litany Yanek has experienced that has made him more mature and more responsible for himself. Not only that, Yanek now feels the responsibility of surviving even more, to make sure his family is still "written on the pages of the world" so that they can be remembered.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ I don't know why I showed them. Not when you survived by looking out for yourself and only yourself. Maybe it was because I'd wanted someone to help me when I had needed it. Maybe it was just that I would be lonely in there all day. But maybe it was that I just couldn't keep the secret from someone else who could use help too. I'd done that with the black-market food Moshe had bought for us, and I'd felt guilty.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Uncle Moshe, Isaac, Thomas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after Moshe's death, Yanek discovers a crawl space under the floorboards in his barracks. He tells two other boys in the barracks, Thomas and Isaac, about the space, and the three of them hide together under the floorboards, regaining their strength.

Even though Yanek is uncertain here about telling the other boys about what he has found, it is clear that having a connection to other people is lifesaving for both him and the boys. Even though Moshe gave the advice not to connect with or care about anyone else, this statement is ironic considering that Yanek and Moshe cared about each other and sought to protect and support each other. Thus, Yanek feels the need to do that for others and also to feel supported himself once again. Connecting with Thomas and Isaac not only provides them with physical safety in being able to hide from the Nazis, but also with emotional comfort as they tell each other about their families.

Yanek's compassion also comes to the fore here: after feeling guilty about not sharing his bread with a man who needed it in the previous chapter, Yanek chooses to provide

this small act of kindness to the other boys. This illustrates how, even as the Jews are dehumanized by the Nazis, Yanek is still able to retain some of that humanity, in contrast to the brutality of the Nazis.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ I was an animal to them, a pack mule. But beasts were never treated so poorly. Working animals were expensive. They had value. I was a Jew. We were lower than animals. They could kill as many of us as they wanted, and there would always be another trainload of us to take our place.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108-109

Explanation and Analysis

After forced labor in the Wieliczka salt mine, Yanek is transferred to the Trzebinia concentration camp. He describes how demoralizing this camp specifically is: not only do they have to do the same back-breaking labor, but the Nazis also like to play games with the prisoners, purposefully trying to provoke them in order to then punish them.

Yanek explains how this behavior is a major way in which the Nazis dehumanize them. As he explains, their conditions and treatment are worse than animals: they have very little food and terrible living conditions, and they're constantly beaten and worked to death. This quote also illuminates how the prisoners are not considered as individuals, but rather as a group that is expendable, devaluing them even further. This is another aspect of how Yanek relinquishes his identity: even though he partially chooses not to stand out and makes himself as anonymous as possible in order to survive, the Nazis also make efforts to remove the prisoners' individuality as another means of dehumanizing them. Yanek's thoughts here also imply that dehumanization can be a self-fulfilling prophecy: when Yanek is treated like an animal, he feels that he loses part of his humanity. Even though he keeps his determination, he has in many ways internalized the idea that his life has become worthless, and that he is easily replaceable.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ There was no rhyme or reason to whether we lived or died. One day it might be the man next to you at roll call who is torn apart by dogs. The next day it might be you who is shot through the head. You could play the game perfectly and still lose, so why bother playing at all?

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Amon Goeth, Uncle Moshe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128-129

Explanation and Analysis

When Yanek arrives at Birkenau concentration camp, he and the other prisoners are immediately sent to take showers—which most of the prisoners assume means that they are being sent to the gas chambers. The prisoners are forced to undress, and once they are in the showers, Yanek starts to panic.

This quote, taken from Yanek's thoughts as he waits in the showers to die, illustrates his deep despair at the idea that so much of one's survival is contingent upon luck. No matter how much a person wants to survive—like Moshe, or the man who was killed by Amon Goeth's dogs, or the many other Jews who have been unjustly killed—a large part of one's survival can come down to fortune, or at least avoiding misfortune.

Gratz also illustrates how one's determination and luck can be reliant upon each other. In this moment, facing the reality that survival can come down purely to chance, Yanek loses all of the determination he once had, even suggesting that if he had known how much luck played into one's survival, he would never have tried to survive in the first place. However, this idea is completely reversed after Yanek makes it through the showers: given how lucky he is to have lived, he knows that he owes it to himself and to others to try to survive no matter what.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ After the shower, nothing seemed to matter as much to me. I knew it was a game to the Nazis—kill us, don't kill us, to them it didn't really matter—but even so, I was glad I had made it through.

I had been ready to die. But when water came out of those showers, not gas, it was like I was born again. I had survived, and I would keep surviving.

I was alive.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

When Yanek arrives in Birkenau, the prisoners are sent to the showers, which they think certainly means that they will be killed in a gas chamber. Yanek resigns himself to die, frustrated that he could have worked so hard to stay alive and yet still be killed. But rather than gas, water comes out, and Yanek is relieved.

In this quote, Gratz reveals how this reprieve becomes a turning point for Yanek. His frustration prior to the shower is turned on its head here. He still recognizes that his survival requires both determination and luck, as he understands that the Nazis are still indifferent to any individual prisoner living or dying. But rather than allowing this idea to fill him with despair, Yanek chooses to use it as a motivator. The fact that he and the other prisoners did not die in the showers is exceptionally lucky, and Yanek feels that he now has a responsibility to take advantage of that luck to propel him to keep living. This is the first time Yanek uses the words, "I was alive," and this becomes a mantra that he repeats over and over again. In essence, the mantra uses the fact that he has already made it this far to encourage him to continue on. Thus, even though luck and determination separately are needed for one's survival, luck can also be used as fuel for that determination.

That's what the Nazis carved into my skin. *B* for *Birkenau*, *3087* for my prisoner number. That was the mark they put on me, a mark I would have for as long as I lived. B-3087. That was who I was to them. Not Yanek Gruener, son of Oskar and Mina. Not Yanek Gruener of 20 Krakusa Street, Podgórze, Kraków. Not Yanek Gruener who loved books and science and American movies.
I was Prisoner B-3087.
But I was *alive*.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Mina Gruener, Oskar Gruener

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 131-132

Explanation and Analysis

After Yanek survives the showers at Birkenau, the Nazis shave his head and tattoo a number onto his skin. Here, Yanek's thoughts illuminate what this represents to him: Yanek is no longer an individual, having been relegated to a number. This is how the Nazis strip the prisoners of their identity, and thus everything that gave life meaning. Without individuality, the Nazis don't view Yanek as a complex person with a family, a home, or desires—he is simply one of many prisoners that are expendable to them. In addition to all of the physical trauma that the Nazis inflict, this action of tattooing the prisoners is emotionally abusive because it is so dehumanizing, treating the prisoners as though they are animals to be branded.

Still, even in the face of this cruelty, Yanek affirms that he is alive and will continue to persevere, particularly because he knows that this is the only way in which he will be able to regain the identity that he once had. This is made clear at the end of the book: in contrast to this scene, when the Americans liberate Yanek in 1945, Yanek tells a soldier his name, and the soldier refers to him by name in turn. Gratz thus correlates Yanek's ability to be an individual with his freedom, and his ability to find hope and meaning in life.

"We are alive," I told him. "We are alive, and that is all that matters. We cannot let them tear us from the pages of the world."

I said it as much for me as for him. I said it in memory of Uncle Moshe, and my mother and father, and my aunts and other uncles and cousins. The Nazis had put me in a gas chamber. I had thought I was dead, but I was alive. I was a new man that day, just like the bar mitzvah boy. I was a new man, and I was going to *survive*.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Oskar Gruener, Mina Gruener, Uncle Moshe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Back at the barracks, after Yanek has survived his first day at Birkenau, another man announces that a boy has turned 13 that day. Yanek offers to stand with him for his bar mitzvah. Yanek remembers his own bar mitzvah, only a few years earlier, and he thinks about how much older he feels now than he did back then. This is a reflection of how much trauma Yanek has had to endure in the intervening years:

the loss of his parents, the death of Moshe, physical and emotional abuse at the hands of the Nazis. All of these hardships have forced Yanek to be a lot more responsible and mature, and it is out of this understanding that Yanek gives the boy the advice that Moshe once gave to him.

Just as Oskar shared his own wisdom with Yanek during his bar mitzvah, Yanek shares wisdom with the boy as well—another means of illustrating Yanek's maturity. Yanek explains the imperative of surviving at all costs in the face of the abuse that they endure. Yanek's (and this boy's) continued survival means that he bears an additional responsibility: to make sure that the world will not forget the Gruener family or the Jewish people as a whole. Yanek knows he must survive so that he can remember those who have not been able to do so and carry on their memory. And even though bearing that loss is difficult, Gratz illustrates how it serves as further fuel for Yanek's determination.

Chapter 20 Quotes

"Where are you from?" Fred asked me while we worked.

I hesitated, remembering Uncle Moshe's warnings. But Fred was the first person close to my age I'd met since hiding under the floors at Plaszów with Isaac and Thomas. I loved just talking again. Being human.

Related Characters: Fred, Yanek Gruener (speaker), Thomas, Isaac, Uncle Moshe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

When Yanek is at Auschwitz, he becomes acquainted with a boy about his age named Fred. Here, he explains his hesitation in getting to know Fred, but he also explains his desire to connect with others. Yanek recalls Moshe's warning here, remembering that Moshe counselled him not to let the Nazis see him care about anything, because it could easily get him killed. This is why both he and Moshe usually isolated themselves from others, choosing to be anonymous.

However, there are key instances in which Yanek goes against these warnings. The first occurs soon after Moshe's death in Plaszów, when Yanek hides under the floorboards of his barracks, sharing the space with boys named Isaac and Thomas. He does this because he recognizes the value in connecting with other people—being able to talk about himself and his home is a salve to the dehumanization that the Nazis have shown. Additionally, the information that he shares with them allows the other boys to gain strength as well, showing how their connections can provide life-saving forms of resistance, even if they cannot rebel outright. The same is true of Fred: Yanek chooses to befriend him in spite of the danger, because he recognizes the benefit of having a friend. Fred provides him with emotional fortitude and the feeling of being a human once more—both things that are crucial to surviving.

Chapter 22 Quotes

I should let him go, I thought over and over. *Let him make his own way. I should save myself.* That was how you survived the camps: You saved yourself. No one else was going to do it for you.

But this boy had a face. He had a name too, though I didn't know it. He had a mother and father, probably dead now, but he had family. A home somewhere. He could have been me.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Fred, Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

When Yanek and the other prisoners march from Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen, Yanek notices a boy about his age who looks very close to death. At first, Yanek thinks that he shouldn't help the boy—that he should focus on saving himself. But Yanek thinks that the boy reminds him of Fred, and even of himself, and so he decides to help the boy and support some of his weight on the march.

Yanek's thoughts show themselves to be a major reversal from so much of what he has been forced to do up until this point. He has had to isolate himself, not caring about anything or anyone else—and the same has been true of the other prisoners' attitudes towards him. But Yanek also recognizes that the few times he has been able to connect to other prisoners, like with Fred, he has felt more human. Thus, helping other people is not only a way of resisting the Nazis and helping more of the Jews to survive, but it is also an act of kindness which reminds Yanek that he still has a great deal of humanity left in him. While he has felt severely demoralized and dehumanized by the Nazis, aiding the boy restores some of his faith in humanity and in himself. It is also an acknowledgement that even though they are forced to be anonymous in the camps, with all markers of their

identity removed, they are still individuals—and this small act of kindness can make a real difference to this individual boy's life.

> I shook with anger and frustration. He was supposed to die! I needed him to die, so I could have his bread.

I closed my eyes. What was I thinking? I wouldn't steal bread from a living boy, but I would wish death on him so I could take it without guilt? What were the camps doing to me? What had the Nazis turned me into?

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Boy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

When Yanek is on his first death march, from Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen, he helps a boy by supporting his weight on the march—but in the process, the bread Yanek is saving falls out of his waistband. He contemplates stealing from the boy, but he feels guilty about doing so, figuring that the boy would likely be dead by the morning. When the boy survives the night, however, Yanek is furious before realizing the horror of his own thoughts.

This episode illustrates different ways in which the cruelty of the Nazis has made Yanek feel dehumanized, and how he is still trying to retain some of his humanity. Without any food whatsoever, Yanek is near death. Thus, his thoughts are a reflection of any person who has been reduced to their most basic needs. Without the possibility of food, Yanek feels like an animal—and he recognizes how this causes him to act and think without humanity, wishing that the boy would die so that he could take his bread. Thus, Gratz illustrates the self-fulfilling prophecy of dehumanization: the more that Yanek is treated as though he is subhuman, the more he is forced to act in inhumane ways.

Chapter 25 Quotes

> One day the Nazis gave two prisoners the chance. They dropped a piece of raw meat in the mud between two men and told them to fight for it, and they did. The SS officers laughed at them and hit them with clubs while the Jews scrambled in the mud for their dinner. The animals in the zoo were never treated so badly.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

When Yanek is transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp, he sees that the camp has a zoo to entertain the Nazi soldiers and their family members. Gratz relays Yanek's observation that the animals are treated and fed better than the prisoners themselves, to the point where he even thinks that he would fight the bear for its steak. He then recounts an incident in which the Nazis instigate such a fight between the prisoners.

This incident serves as another dimension of the Nazis' cruelty and dehumanization, as they literally treat the prisoners like animals who can be made to fight for their entertainment. The prisoners, for their own part, are so desperate for food and so fearful of their captors that they resort to fighting each other. Yanek goes on to describe another incident in which animal cruelty towards a deer is not tolerated—another ironic tragedy, as cruelty to the prisoners is commonplace and goes unpunished and is even encouraged. Thus, these serve as more examples of the way in which being treated as an animal leads to feeling as though one is an animal—or, as Yanek points out, even worse than an animal. Having the zoo in the camp makes that comparison a very literal one.

Chapter 27 Quotes

> Farther inside Czechoslovakia, some of the villagers hung out of their windows to throw whatever they had to us—crusts of bread, half-eaten apples, raw potatoes. The Czechs couldn't share much—there was a war on, after all, and food was hard to come by. But their kindness in the face of the Nazi soldiers and their guns warmed my heart. It was easy to think the worst of humanity when all I saw was brutality and selfishness, and these people showed me there was still good in the world, even if I rarely saw it.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Fred, Boy, Isaac, Thomas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 224-225

Explanation and Analysis

On Yanek's second death march, he and the other prisoners walk from Gross-Rosen to Dachau concentration camp. Their path takes them through Czechoslovakia before returning to Germany. Yanek describes how, in many villages, citizens leave bread on their doorstep or windowsills or hang out of their windows to throw food; Yanek is in awe of this compassion.

This quote illustrates another of Gratz's points about humanity: in contrast to the Nazis' unrelenting cruelty and inhumanity, even the smallest acts of kindness can restore Yanek's faith in the world and give him more fuel to survive. It also makes clear that Yanek is still in possession of that same humanity in spite of the dehumanization he has faced. He has shown immense kindness even during times of crisis: he shared his hiding space with Thomas and Isaac, helped the boy on the first death march, and shared bread with Fred after the prisoner next to him died. Bread becomes a key part of their physical wellbeing, but it also serves as a symbol for their emotional wellbeing as they try to support each other, and that metaphor is reinforced here. The bread is not only a way for them to regain their strength and survive—it is emotional sustenance that provides them with hope and a desire to return to the world that has largely forsaken them.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ I fell to my knees and wept. Had I really made it? Had I actually survived the Kraków ghetto and ten different concentration camps? […]

"What's your name?" he asked me.

"Yanek," I told him. "My name is Yanek."

"Everything's going to be all right now, Yanek," he told me, and for the first time in six years, I believed he was right.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

In April 1945, after surviving 10 different concentration camps, American soldiers liberate Yanek and other prisoners from Dachau concentration camp. Yanek's thoughts first demonstrate that his perseverance and determination has paid off, as he was able to survive all the horrors and trauma of the Nazis. Yet the fact that he phrases it as a question, and that it comes from a place of disbelief, also suggests that Yanek knows he could easily not have made it. At any step along the way, Yanek could easily have died from some unlucky chance, like so many of the people whom he saw perish. Gratz argues through Yanek that he knows he has been able to survive only through a combination of luck and determination.

Additionally, Yanek's exchange with the American soldiers is a pivotal and fulfilling moment for him. Leaving the camps represents a return to normal life: of being able to have relationships, to pursue passions and desire, and to have a humane standard of living. All of these ideas are inherent in the concept of having an identity and of leading an individual, meaningful life. Yanek has been deprived of these things for years, but this simple interaction with the American soldier makes it clear that Yanek is no longer just the number that the Nazis relegated him to. Instead, he is now ready and able to return to the world as Yanek Gruener.

Chapter 30 Quotes

❝ Beside my bed there was a little table, and on the table the Americans had given me more gifts: a washcloth, a cup, and a toothbrush. I picked up the toothbrush reverently and cried as I held it in my hands. I remembered that day, standing at the pump in the camp—which camp had it been?—when I wondered when I had ever been so fortunate as to have something so simple as a toothbrush. Piece by piece, bit by bit, the Americans were giving me back my life.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

After the Americans liberate Yanek and the other prisoners from Dachau, they give him temporary housing in Munich. When he arrives, he is amazed to find that the Americans have given him basic toiletries, like the ones he cites here. He recalls an earlier time at Sachsenhausen when he had been amazed at the idea of having once owned a toothbrush.

This illustrates a symbolic turning point for Yanek: with his liberation, he has returned to a world of basic decency and humanity, away from the cruelty and torment of the Nazis. The toothbrush is a symbol of this basic decency. Even though it is an essential component of human hygiene, Yanek has been denied one for so long—another aspect of the Nazi's dehumanization. The same is true of other simple things that Yanek cites: the washcloth, the pillows and sheets, the forks and knives. As the Nazis slowly took away Yanek's life piece by piece, the Americans are now giving it back to him. This is further reinforced by the idea that the Americans are giving him back his identity and his ability to form relationships—an idea that is solidified when Yanek chooses to go to America, because doing so was once a fantasy of his. All of these ideas give Yanek's life meaning anew, whereas prior to this, he was utterly deprived of hope for a meaningful life.

> I remembered the food on the table in my old apartment in Podgórze, and all my family sitting around me. Mother and Father. Uncle Moshe and Aunt Gizela, and little cousin Zytka. Uncle Abraham and Aunt Fela. […]
>
> I thought too of my friend Fred, and the boy who had been hanged for trying to escape, and the man who had fought back, and all the other people I had watched die. They filled my table and the tables all around me, taking the places of all the real people in the room.

Related Characters: Yanek Gruener (speaker), Fred, Aunt Fela, Uncle Abraham, Zytka, Aunt Gizela, Uncle Moshe, Mina Gruener, Oskar Gruener

Related Themes:

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Yanek enjoys his first real meal in freedom, sitting down at tables with the American soldiers and fellow survivors for dinner. First, the survivors are amazed at basic things—tables, chairs, forks, knives, the simple courtesy of passing the salt—but their overwhelming amazement at the dinner is tempered by something more bittersweet.

Yanek acknowledges that in the midst of this dinner, he carries with him the memories of so many people who were unable to survive the war—so many of his family members, friends he had made along the way, and even total strangers whose lives he still wants to honor. Yanek has experienced a tremendous amount of trauma in the previous six years, and he has grown up a great deal. But in being able to live on when others could not, Yanek recognizes that he carries an additional burden because of his survival. He must remember those who could not live to adulthood as he will (like Fred and the boy who was hanged) or who were not able to live out the full extent of their lives (like his family members). As Moshe said in an earlier chapter, Yanek could not let the Nazis tear the Gruener family from the pages of the world. With Yanek able to survive, and with the real Jack Gruener being able to relay his story to Alan Gratz, Yanek has ensured that his family will live on—in his heart, in his own descendants, and in this book's pages.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Yanek Gruener opens the novel by explaining that if he had known what the next six years of his life would entail, he would have eaten more and not complained about brushing his teeth or taking a bath; he would have laughed and played more and told his parents that he loved them more often. But at the time, at 10 years old, he had no idea what was to come.

Yanek is commenting from the perspective of the future, after he has experienced the trauma of World War II. By framing the novel in this way, Gratz will be able to illuminate how much Yanek has lost, and how much he has grown up, in those intervening six years.

In late September 1939, Yanek and his family live in Kraków, Poland. One evening, Yanek's extended family gathers in his parents' home for dinner. As they eat, they worriedly discuss how Hitler wants to make the Jews "disappear from Europe." Germany has already annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia and recently invaded Poland. Yanek's father, Oskar, tries to calm his brother Moshe, explaining that Britain and France already declared war on Germany and predicting that the war won't last six months.

Yanek's family dinner provides some background for the conflict of World War II, illustrating how Hitler and Nazi Germany's anti-Semitism is a primary motivation for the war to come. The dinner also indicates the connection and closeness between Yanek and his extended family—relationships that will likely disappear from Yanek's life as the Nazi regime overtakes Poland.

Yanek's mother, Mina, dismisses the political talk and asks Yanek to "put on a show"—he's built his own slide projector so that he can show pictures on the wall or do shadow puppet shows. Yanek loves movies—particularly American Westerns. He enjoys putting on shows for his family, who cheer and laugh as he performs. He wonders if, one day, he can go to America to work on movies.

Here, Gratz introduces parts of Yanek's identity, illustrating the things that are most important to him, even at 10 years old. Yanek's ability to show his personality and his aspiration to make movies in the future will contrast with his identity if he's sent to the concentration camps, where he'll be forced to make himself anonymous and to relinquish all of the things that make him an individual.

As Yanek performs, the radio abruptly changes to announce that the German Army has reached Kraków. The adults in the room are shocked. Suddenly, there is a big boom outside the window: the Germans have arrived. Yanek again reiterates that if he had known then what he knows now, he would have run with his family without stopping to take anything with him. But instead, they listen to the radio and watch as the Germans arrive.

Again, Gratz uses this future perspective to illustrate how much trauma Yanek is about to experience, the identity he is about to be stripped of, and the family he is about to lose. But the novel thus also serves as a way of preserving the memories of Yanek's (and the real Jack Gruener's) family.

CHAPTER 2

After the German soldiers arrive, life in Kraków changes quickly: food becomes scarcer, and Nazis tell Poles and Germans not to buy from Jews. At school, the Polish boys won't play with Yanek anymore—and one morning, Yanek learns that Jews are no longer allowed to go to school. Yanek returns home at lunch to find Oskar, Mina, and Moshe all there.

Upon the Germans' arrival, it becomes clear that they are trying to slowly treat the Jews as lesser than other citizens, gradually separating them from society in order to eventually remove them from it altogether.

Yanek tells his parents about being banned from school. Moshe is outraged, but Oskar again says that this will pass. Moshe explains that Jews are being given ration cards with Js on them to buy food. Jews are also forced to wear armbands with the Star of David, and they can't use any public facilities like libraries, movie theaters, or parks. Jews also cannot go outside their homes after nine p.m. Mina tells Moshe that they don't have the money to leave, and they have nowhere to go even if they could. Oskar again assures Moshe that the Nazis cannot take away who they are.

These various policies illustrate the many ways in which the Nazis are trying to dehumanize the Jewish people, preventing them from working or even moving freely around the city. Oskar's statement that the Nazis can't take away who they are foreshadows Jewish people's imminent struggle to prevent the Nazis from doing just this. They'll have to fight to maintain any semblance of their individuality as the Holocaust progresses.

Yanek wakes in the middle of the night hearing cries of, "fire!" Yanek, Oskar, and Mina look out the window and see that the synagogue is burning. When a man comes out to try and stop the fire, a Nazi soldier shoots him. The officer yells that Jews cannot be outside their homes after curfew. Oskar, who had been putting on his coat, quietly removes it and sends Yanek back to bed.

This is another act of anti-Semitism, targeting the synagogue as a place where Jews worship—and it's also a means of disrupting their identity. The Nazis reduce the Jewish people to their religion and ethnicity, but without the ability to practice, a part of that identity is taken away as well.

CHAPTER 3

Two years later, when Yanek is 12, the Nazis start to build a wall to create a Jewish ghetto in Yanek's neighborhood. All the Polish people who live in the neighborhood move out, and all the Jews in Kraków who live outside the ghetto have to move in. Thousands of Jews pour in from other areas, and the Germans decree that each flat must hold four families. In Yanek's flat, 14 people live in a space that had been comfortable for three people.

The Nazis continue to institute policies in Kraków that separate and specifically target Jewish people. The conditions in which Yanek and his family live start to deteriorate more and more. The cramming of 14 people into a space meant for three is seemingly a middle ground between normal life and conditions at the concentration camps, where people are often stuffed into small spaces like animals.

All Yanek wants to do is go outside and play, but anytime the Germans have work to be done, like scrubbing toilets or building the ghetto's wall, they grab Jews off the street to do it. Sometimes they even take people out of the ghetto, never to return. Oskar continues to assure Yanek that this will all be over by the summer, but Yanek doubts his father for the first time in his life.

Gratz shows how Yanek is teetering between childhood and adulthood: at 12 years old, it's understandable that all he wants to do is go outside and play. But as he witnesses more and more of the Nazis' abuse, he gains maturity and foresight even to the point that he is questioning his father.

CHAPTER 4

The flat is so crowded that Yanek often sleeps on his hall floor. One night, he hears Oskar sneaking out after curfew, and Yanek asks to go with him. Yanek's father relents; they sneak out through back alleys, hiding themselves from the Nazi soldiers in the streets. Eventually, they make it to Yanek's uncle Abraham's bakery, which the Nazis have allowed him to keep open to bake **bread** for the soldiers.

Yanek continues his coming-of-age journey by taking on more responsibility. Even though it is dangerous (and potentially life-threatening) to go out after curfew, Yanek is insistent on accompanying his father to help him with whatever he is doing.

Once inside the bakery, Yanek is overwhelmed by the "beautiful smell of **bread**," and his stomach growls in hunger. Abraham and Yanek's aunt Fela greet Yanek and Oskar. They explain that they're baking bread in one oven and burning wet wood to cover the smell in the other. Yanek and his father feed the fires so that Abraham and Fela can bake the dough. When they are finished baking, they give Yanek and Oskar three sacks of bread: two to sell and one to have. Yanek and his father then leave quickly before it's light, and Yanek thinks that the fresh bread in the morning will help him forget all of his troubles.

Here, Gratz begins to connect bread to Yanek's wellbeing, a symbol that will recur throughout the novel. At this moment, the bread is still warm and still has the ability to make Yanek forget the anxiety surrounding the Nazi occupation. Gratz also illustrates how the connection and solidarity between Yanek and the rest of his family is imperative for his survival and security.

CHAPTER 5

At the start of 1942, the British and the French are fighting the Germans, but mostly on the western border. Meanwhile, the Nazis continue to take Jews away to work in the factories, and many of them do not come back. Yanek spends his time kicking a ball in the hallway outside the apartment, until another woman in the building, Mrs. Immerglick, yells at him to stop.

Mrs. Immerglick's annoyed reaction to Yanek is understandable given the stress of the circumstances. But it also hints at how the Nazis' dehumanization of Jewish people leads them to regard one another with less humility, as separate individuals at odds with one another rather than a unified group.

Suddenly, Yanek hears doors smashing and screaming in the building. Everyone who lives in his apartment gathers in the sitting room, and someone starts to pound on the door, telling them to open up or they'll break it down. Oskar is out standing in line for vegetable rations, and Mina doesn't know what to do. Yanek worries that the Nazis will shoot them if they don't open the door, and so he takes it upon himself to unlock it.

This is another benchmark in Yanek's growth and coming of age story. With his father out of the house and danger at the door, Yanek takes it upon himself to make the adult decision and let the Nazis into the apartment in order to protect the people in it, astutely recognizing that refusing to do so could cause more harm than good.

A Nazi soldier and a *Judenrat* (a Jewish police officer whom the Nazis put in charge of the ghetto) named Holtzman barge into the flat, demanding their valuables. The families give what little they have, and the Nazi soldier pulls off Mina's necklace and wedding ring. The men search the flat for more valuables. Before they leave, they tell Yanek and the others that next time they should open the door more quickly, or they'll send them "to the east."

This is the first real depiction of how the Nazis target Jewish people with violence and cruelty for their own benefit. They are even able to get Jewish people like the Judenrat *to turn on the one another, motivated by fear of being targeted themselves.*

After the soldiers leave, Yanek watches out the window as the Immerglick family is taken into the military trucks. Yanek realizes that they were spared and that the Immerglicks were taken simply on the whim of the Nazis. The families in Yanek's flat discover that they have nothing to eat: their rations had been taken. Yanek slips into the hall for some privacy, and Yanek sees another one of their neighbors, Mr. Tatarka, going through the Immerglicks' things.

Here, Yanek begins to reckon with the idea that sometimes one's survival is not based only on an active will to persevere, but also on sheer luck. The Nazis could just have easily taken Yanek's family to the camps, and yet the Immerglicks were taken instead. Meanwhile, Mr. Tatarka pilfering the Immerglicks' belongings is another example of how the Nazis' dehumanization of Jews can lead to Jewish people losing touch with their own humanity and sense of community with others.

Yanek looks through the building: 12 flats in the building are empty, meaning 48 families had been taken. When Yanek reaches the top floor, he notices that there is another staircase going up, leading to a steel door and a pigeon coop behind it. Yanek descends once more and finds Oskar has returned, and Yanek is grateful that he has not been taken. Yanek shows his parents the pigeon coop and explains that they could clean it up and live in the coop.

Here, Yanek starts to observe the sheer scale of the Nazis' cruelty as they raid, abuse, and deport families en masse with no reservations. In this moment of crisis, Yanek also continues to prove his maturity, as he comes up with an ingenious solution that will help protect his family from the Nazis.

Yanek and his parents bring up furniture from their apartment to the pigeon coop. Mina sews all their remaining money and valuables into the linings of their coats. Yanek and Oskar also find steel bars to put on the door to the coop, assuring Mina that no one would ever be able to break in again.

Even with his father home, Yanek displays his maturity as he tries to comfort his mother. He eases her worries both with his words and with a concrete plan to keep the Nazis at bay, illustrating a role reversal between them.

CHAPTER 6

Yanek, Oskar, and Mina live in the pigeon coop while raids and "resettlements" continue in the ghetto. Jews are taken thousands at a time, though some sneak back to the ghetto and tell stories of camps where Jews are worked to death. Oskar tells Yanek not to listen to the rumors. One day in February, the director of the *Judenrat* calls a ghetto-wide meeting. The *Judenrat* are hated throughout the ghetto for working with the Nazis, but Yanek acknowledges that any man who refuses the position is shot or hanged.

As conditions worsen in the ghetto, Gratz illustrates how the spread of fear and paranoia is dividing rather than uniting people. The Nazis are able to turn the Judenrat *against other Jews through their cruelty, and in turn, the* Judenrat *do not resist the Nazis' unthinkable demands. Given the older Yanek's ominous reflections on what is to come, it seems that the rumors Oskar and Yanek hear likely have truth to them.*

At the meeting, the director tells the crowd that the Nazis have ordered him to give them 7,000 Jews to deport. He says that it is better to keep the people who can work in the ghetto so that they take fewer people away, and so he suggests that they send the children. The crowd listening to the director is outraged, arguing that they would be sending their children to death camps. The director assures them that he is trying to save as many lives as possible. Oskar takes Yanek out of the square.

Here, Gratz continues to illustrate the way in which the Nazis' tactics divide people. By playing on fear, people like Yanek and his family resort to isolation to protect themselves and their loved ones. In taking Yanek away from the square, Oskar rejects the plan that the Judenrat *director has in mind, opting to protect his son on his own terms rather than sending him away for the supposed good of the community.*

Oskar assures Yanek that he would not let the Nazis take Yanek away—particularly because the next day is Yanek's 13th birthday, meaning he will no longer be a child. Yanek is pleased that Oskar remembers his 13th birthday: the day that he will become a man according to Jewish law. However, Yanek isn't sure how they'll hold his bar mitzvah ceremony, because if they are caught they will be killed. Yanek's father tells him to sleep in his clothes that night.

Yanek's bar mitzvah signifies another major step in his coming of age, and it's also an integral part of his identity. Even though the Nazis have reduced them to their Jewish identity, the Nazis have also taken away so much of what makes them Jewish, like the synagogue and their freedom to practice their religion. The ability to have the ceremony anyway provides Yanek with a deep sense of meaning and hope.

That evening, Yanek and Oskar sneak out of the apartment and go to an abandoned warehouse building. His uncles Abraham and Moshe are there, along with other men who Yanek doesn't know—10 men to complete the ceremony. They have Torah scrolls with them, saved from one of the ghetto's synagogues. Yanek reads from the Torah as best he can, though he has not been able to practice.

Yanek takes a major step in his coming of age. Even though simply having the ceremony does not make Yanek a man, the hardships that surround him and his family (including the fact that he cannot openly practice the Torah without fear of death) do give him a greater sense of maturity and responsibility.

When Yanek finishes, Oskar tells him that he is now a man: he is responsible for his own sins and his own goodness. He says, "all we are worth, is […] how we treat our fellow man." Yanek assures his father that he will remember this. The other men congratulate Yanek before hurrying off.

In the midst of the cruelty and the anti-Semitism of the Nazis, Yanek's father highlights the need for humanity toward one another—a lesson that Yanek will certainly carry with him as the Holocaust worsens.

CHAPTER 7

The next morning, the 7,000 volunteers have not appeared to be deported. The Nazis blare announcements saying that the Jews will be punished if they come out, but they'll be killed if they hide. Yanek, Oskar, and Mina hide in the pigeon coop, along with his Uncle Moshe, Aunt Gizela, Yanek's cousin Zytka, and the rest of his aunts, uncles and cousins.

Yanek's ingenuity and responsibility again prove indispensable, as his discovery of the pigeon coop affords protection to Yanek's entire extended family in the face of Nazi deportations.

Yanek looks out a small window to see what is happening, and he announces that the Nazis are taking sick and old people out of the hospital to take to the camps. But then, Yanek that they aren't going to the camps: they're being shot in the square. Yanek and his family sit there for hours, listening to the gunshots and screams.

Here, Yanek starts to provide a fuller picture of the violent cruelty of the Nazis as they kill the elderly and the sick simply because they can. Given the real-life historical context of the Holocaust, it's clear that this startling lack of humanity is only the beginning.

Suddenly, the metal door to the coop rattles—someone is trying to get through. Everyone holds their breath, but the person leaves. That evening, the trucks blare a new message: if the Jews do not come to the square, the whole ghetto will be "liquidated." Moshe argues that they should go, saying that the Nazis will kill them if they don't. Yanek insists that it's a trick to get them out of their hiding place. He says that if they leave they will certainly be killed, but if they stay there is a chance they can survive.

Yanek proves his true maturity in arguing for why they shouldn't leave the pigeon coop, despite the inherent dangers. Even though he is still only 13, Yanek has the wisdom to understand the gravity of the situation and to be able to reason with the adults—a wisdom that comes only from the danger that he has already learned to elude over the previous three years.

Oskar agrees with Yanek, and gradually everyone else agrees with Yanek as well and decides to stay. The deportations, gunshots and screams last for two days. But on the third day, the Nazis and the trucks leave without liquidating the ghetto. Seven thousand Jews had been collected, but Yanek's family are not among them.

Not only is Yanek able to see the situation clearly—and is proven right—but his wisdom is also able to convince the adults. By exhibiting maturity beyond his years, he's able to save all of their lives (at least for now) in the process.

CHAPTER 8

After the deportation, rumors spring up about what had happened to the Jews that were taken: that the Nazis killed them with in gas trucks and then used their bodies to make soap. Life in the ghetto continues, however. Those who can work are less likely to be taken away, so Yanek finds a job in a tailor shop.

Even though the rumors are horrific, they are not far from the truth. Gratz continues to foreshadow the overwhelming brutality and inhumanity that many Jews experience at the concentration camps.

One day after work, Yanek happens to go by a friend's house instead of going straight home. When he heads home, he sees men and women being deported along the way. Yanek hides, hoping to escape the same fate. Among the crowd, Yanek thinks he sees Mina and Oskar, but he isn't sure. He dashes all the way home and finds his cousin Sala. She explains, sobbing, that the Nazis picked up Yanek's parents while they were going to get **bread**.

Here, Yanek starts to experience hardships firsthand, as he'll likely never see his parents again. The loss of his family at such a young age is a deep trauma in and of itself, and going forward, Yanek will be forced to take on a great deal of responsibility for himself now that he is alone.

Yanek is devastated—his family is gone. He wonders if he should give himself up to the Nazis, but he knows that his parents would not want him to do so. He feels a sense of determination rising within him and resolves to survive rather than give up. At 13 years old, Yanek is on his own, but he affirms that he will make it.

Gratz illustrates how, because Yanek feels so isolated, he considers giving up—highlighting the idea that connection with others can fuel one's perseverance. But despite Yanek's despair, he rouses his determination, without which he would never have survived.


CHAPTER 9

After Yanek's parents are taken to the concentration camp, his aunts, uncles, and cousins are quickly taken as well. Yanek, the only member of his family remaining, is then taken from his job at the tailor shop because they need workers at the tailor shop in Plaszów, a nearby labor camp. He begins to panic as he's is loaded into a truck, wondering what fate might befall him.

Gratz emphasizes Yanek's further isolation even after his parents are taken, recounting how his entire family quickly followed. Now, without anyone else to be responsible for him, Yanek must take care of himself entirely at only 13 years old.


The truck takes Yanek to Plaszów, a series of buildings surrounded by barbed wire. He is ordered to strip and is forced to exchange his clothing for a pair of wooden shoes and a blue and gray striped prison uniform. Yanek thinks that he is "officially a prisoner." As he walks to the tailor shop, Yanek notices the different symbols on the prisoners' uniforms: the star of David for Jews, red triangles for political prisoners, green for criminals, black for gypsies, purple for Jehovah's Witness, and pink for homosexuals. All of them have a letter to indicate their country of origin, but there are no letters in the Stars of David. Jews, Yanek thinks, "had no country."

Once Yanek arrives at the camp, the Nazis begin the first steps of removing his and others' identity. Now dressed in a prison uniform, and with only the Star of David to identify him, Yanek has become indistinguishable from other Jews. He is not even classified by country, merely by his Jewish identity. While this anonymity helps him survive, as this and future chapters illustrate, it also removes him from any meaningful connection with who he is and the things that give his life value.

As Yanek walks, he spots his uncle Moshe and calls out to him. Moshe sees him and shakes his head in horror, looking away. The kapo demands to know who shouted, saying that prisoners are not to speak unless spoken to. He strikes the man closest to him, and Yanek resolves not to speak again until he can find Moshe privately.

In this passage, Gratz emphasizes what will become Moshe's two major lessons for Yanek in the camps: the need to be anonymous, and the need to be isolated from others. Trying to connect, or standing out in any way, can get a person hurt or even killed.

At the tailor shop, Yanek does the same work as his old job, but he recounts that the workers are often beaten simply because they are Jews. He sees men who are beaten not get up again—they are then dragged away by soldiers, never to return.

Yanek recognizes how the anti-Semitism that he experienced in the Kraków ghetto is only worse in the concentration camps, as he and others experience violence and the threat of death on a daily basis simply because they are Jewish.

That night, Yanek returns to the barracks. As he's eating his small piece of **bread** and watery soup, Moshe finds him, and they hug with relief. Moshe then explains that Yanek cannot do anything to stand out. From now on, he must have "no name, no personality, no family, no friends." Yanek understands.

Moshe emphasizes the need for Yanek to be anonymous, because standing out can get a prisoner killed. This is another, more insidious way in which the Nazis abuse the prisoners: beyond hurting and killing them, they also rob them of individuality and of their very humanity.

Yanek asks Moshe if his parents are there, and Moshe explains that they are not—that unless they were taken to a work camp, they are likely dead. Moshe tells him, through tears, that his wife, Gizela, and daughter Zytka were also shot and killed because they could not work. He says that they have one purpose now: to survive at all costs. He tells Yanek that they cannot let the monstrous Nazis erase them.

Yanek's ability to survive and come of age carries with it additional responsibility, as Moshe implies here. While his parents and many other members of his family were unable to survive, Yanek must do so in order for his family—as well as the Jewish people as a whole—to be remembered and live on in him.

Soon after, Yanek and Moshe line up in an open field for roll call, where the Nazis check that the **numbers** on their clipboards match the numbers on their uniforms. The commandant of the camp, Amon Goeth, walks along the line with two German Shepherds behind him. Suddenly, Goeth stops in front of the prisoner beside him and yells, "Attack! Attack! Kill the Jew!" The dogs immediately start to rip the man beside Yanek to pieces. Yanek wants to help, but knows that if he moves, he will be killed as well. When the man stops moving, Goeth shoots him through the head.

Yanek is introduced to the extreme cruelty of the Nazis as a whole, and particularly Amon Goeth, as he kills Jews for no reason other than to play out his prejudice and to instill fear. Yanek thus begins to understand that determination alone may not ensure a person's survival: the random misfortune of deaths like these proves that he will need luck as well.

Another man is killed at roll call for not doffing his cap in the correct way. When it is over, Yanek feels that he has "survived a battle." Yanek hears someone ask what the score is. Another man says "Goeth seven, Jews nil." When Yanek asks if that's the number Goeth has killed since the man has been here, the man responds that it's only the number of Jews Goeth has killed that day.

Here, Gratz emphasizes the scale of the Nazis' brutality— what Yanek just witnessed at roll call is not a rare occurrence. He and the other prisoners even acknowledge how much of a game their lives are to the Nazis, as they refer to the deaths in the camp by Goeth's "score."

CHAPTER 10

Each morning, Amon Goeth sits on the balcony of his home overlooking the camp and shoots Jews in the parade grounds while listening to music on his record player. Yanek explains that if someone rushed through trying not to be shot, Goeth would shoot at the person on purpose. The best way not to be shot is to have a job somewhere else. Yanek works at the tailor shop, and Uncle Moshe works in a furrier shop. There is always a danger of being killed at roll call, but Yanek learns from Moshe how to be anonymous and avoid this fate.

Amon Goeth's madness continues to show Yanek how one's death in the camps can be simply due to bad luck, but there are ways in which determination can provide fewer chances to be unlucky. By working hard at his job at the tailor's, Yanek is able to avoid this terrible fate. Additionally, at roll call, Yanek's anonymity continues to afford protection from these random deaths.

When the tailor shop closes down, Moshe trades his daily rations to a kapo (a prisoner put in charge of other prisoners) to get Yanek assigned to a new job outside the camp. Yanek is brought back to the Kraków ghetto, which has been completely liquidated. The Nazis tell Yanek and the other prisoners that the ghetto must be cleaned to eradicate any Jewish contamination. They are to search for anything of value, and if they steal anything for themselves, they will be killed.

The fact that Moshe can get another job for Yanek outside the camp illustrates the importance of their relationship and the support that they afford each other. Without this, Yanek would be forced to remain in the camp and would be in much more danger from Amon Goeth.

Yanek is overcome by his memories as he walks through the neighborhood, particularly because he is assigned to clean out the apartment building where he had lived. He remembers his parents and friends, missing them deeply. As he climbs the stairs, he starts to smell something putrid from Mr. Tatarka's flat. When he opens the door, he finds Mr. Tatarka dead in a pool of his own blood. Yanek retches and sobs, running up to the roof to get a breath of fresh air.

For Yanek, returning to the Kraków ghetto and remembering all that he's lost serves as a reminder of how much trauma he has already endured in the time since he left the ghetto. His visit and these memories also illuminate how much Yanek has grown based on what he has witnessed and experienced in the concentration camps.

When Yanek is up in the pigeon coop, he notices Oskar's coat in the corner. He puts the coat on to try to remember the smell of his father, and he feels a lump in one of the sleeves. Yanek remembers with excitement that there is money sewn into the linings. Yanek rips the seams open and finds 1,000 zloty. He then finds his own old coat and finds another 1,000 zloty. Using an old needle and thread, and his skills from the tailor shop, Yanek sews the money into the lining of his own prison uniform, disguising it well.

This is one of the lucky breaks that significantly aids in Yanek's survival. Knowing that he could be killed for taking the money, Yanek sews it into his clothes—proving how Yanek reaps the rewards of both determination and luck.

Yanek continues to work the rest of the day, sorting through clothes and household items. He inspects the clothes to see if anyone else had the same idea as his mother, and he finds a pair of diamond earrings, which he hooks inside his jacket under his arms. The Nazis don't check the prisoners upon their return—likely because two years of imprisonment and raids had bled the ghetto of anything worth owning. When Yanek returns, he tells Moshe to meet him in his barracks at dinner. And when he asks the score, Moshe replies, "Goeth nineteen, Jews nil."

Yanek receives yet another lucky break as he looks through more clothes and tries to find more money. But perhaps his luckiest chance is that the Nazis do not check to see whether he has taken anything. This luck is underscored when, upon his return, he is presented with the tragic deaths of 19 people in the camps. While they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, Yanek happened to be in the right place at the right time.

CHAPTER 11

Moshe is so overwhelmed with excitement at Yanek's newfound fortune that he hugs and kisses Yanek before remembering that he shouldn't let anyone see him care about anything. He explains that there is a man in the munitions plant who smuggles in **bread** and sells it. Moshe says that Yanek has saved them. That night, having acquired bread, Moshe warns Yanek not to let anyone see it, and not to share it with anyone. Moshe tells him that he's hidden the rest in a place no one will find.

Gratz demonstrates how Yanek's luck translates to an increased likelihood of survival, as his and Moshe's ability to get more food is crucial to maintaining their strength. Additionally, the paradox of Moshe's advice is revealed here once again: Moshe advises that Yanek shouldn't care about anything or anyone, even while their care for each other is what's kept them alive.

Moshe returns to his own barracks, and Yanek cradles the **bread**, marveling at his good fortune. A kapo comes in to make sure that everyone is in their bunks. Yanek notices the man below him, who has become what is called a "*Muselmann*." *Muselmanners* are so thin that you can see the bones through their skin. But more than that, *Muselmanners* had given up: their expressions are lifeless and soulless. Yanek knows that his bread could possibly save the man, who is likely dying of starvation. But he also remembers Moshe's warning and knows that he doesn't want to become a *Muselmann* himself, so he eats his bread quietly.

Here, Gratz provides an idea of why determination is so crucial to survival: Muselmanners *are just as weary and ill-fed as the other prisoners, but the difference between them and the others is that they've lost their determination. Being resigned to death is, in some ways, essentially the same as dying. Yanek's decision not to share the bread, though it follows Moshe's advice, makes him feel guilty, which suggests that isolating oneself can rob a person from fundamental aspects of their humanity—chiefly, their connection to others.*

Yanek continues to clean the Kraków ghetto, but he doesn't find anything else of value. Meanwhile, Moshe buys more food with the money Yanek found—even a carrot. Yanek hopes that the money can help them survive for a while. He has heard rumors that the English or French might be closing in from the west, or the Russians from the east. However, Yanek refuses to believe that the war will be over soon.

Again, the supportive relationship that Yanek and Moshe have is shown to be crucial to their survival. Meanwhile, Yanek's refusal to believe the war will end soon exhibits his maturity. Rather than trusting in his father's prior reassurance that the war wouldn't go on for long, losing his family has forced Yanek to grow up and become sobered to the reality of his situation and the wider conflict.

One day, when Yanek returns to the camp from cleaning, he asks a boy from his barracks named Thomas what the score is. Thomas reluctantly tells him just one: Moshe. Thomas explains that they closed the furrier's shop and reassigned the workers to the camp. Moshe was made the leader of a group breaking rocks, and when Goeth asked Moshe how much work had been done, Goeth "didn't like his answer." Yanek refuses to believe it, assuring Thomas that it was someone else.

Moshe's death is another instance of the unfairness and the randomness of the prisoners' fates in the camps. Moshe was only killed because of the misfortune of the furrier's shop closing, and the misfortune of being chosen as group leader. Even though Moshe wanted to persist just as much as Yanek does, bad luck prevented him from surviving.

At roll call, however, Moshe isn't there. Yanek thinks about calling out to him, but he knows that it would be dangerous. He reminds himself to "be no one, with no name, no personality, and no family or friends to care about." But he knows he *does* care—he had thought that he and Moshe could survive together as the last remaining men from the Gruener family. Yanek also realizes that he doesn't know where Moshe hid the money he'd found. Yanek knows that now, at 14 years old, he is completely alone again— this time forever.

Yanek reemphasizes how much Moshe had meant to him: first, his uncle was a connection to his former identity; second, the relationship gave him the rarity of support by another person; and third, it allowed him to be able to feel like he had a parental figure. All of these benefits served as fuel for his determination to survive. Now, Yanek again understands that he has to live because *the others were unable to survive, so that he can carry on their memory.*

CHAPTER 12

A few days later, Yanek is put back to work in Plaszów, and Moshe is no longer there to help get him a job outside the camp. The work is brutal, and sometimes Yanek can barely get up out of his bunk. When he returns one evening, he collapses in the barracks and cannot even carry himself to his bunk. He desperately yearns for someone to help him, but he knows that they barely have energy to spare for themselves. He thinks how much he misses Moshe, and how much he needs a friend.

Even though Moshe counselled Yanek not to form any connections with any other prisoners, Yanek starts to feel the isolation and the despair that comes with a lack of support. He recognizes that he needs someone to help him in place of Moshe—even though Yanek is mature beyond his years, he's still a young boy who needs companionship and parental guidance.

When Yanek starts to get up from the floor, he notices a loose floorboard. He pulls the board loose and finds a space wide enough to sit inside. He thinks that tomorrow after roll call, he could disappear into it instead of showing up for his job—they would simply think he had been reassigned. Yanek feels "Moshe's hand, helping [him] up." He thinks to himself that he is not a *Muselmann* yet.

Gratz illustrates how luck can spur determination. Yanek is lucky to have found the crawl space under the floor, but it also lights a spark in him that makes him determined not to give up. Thus, his continued survival is a combination of both determination and luck.

The next morning after roll call, Yanek shows two boys from his barrack, Thomas and Isaac, the hole in the floor. He knows he should look out for himself, but he understands that they could provide friendship, and he could give them the help that he himself had so desperately needed. At first, Thomas protests that they would be killed for hiding, but Yanek points out that they'll be worked to death otherwise. So the three of them begin to hide together during the day, sleeping and coming out only for roll call.

Yanek recognizes that reaching out and supporting others can afford prisoners life-saving benefits, which is why he chooses to reach out to Thomas and Isaac despite Moshe's warning. This decision does in fact become crucial, as they are able to rest and regain their strength by hiding together.

Yanek explains that the more he, Thomas, and Isaac hide under the floor, the stronger they get. Gradually they sleep less and begin to talk about food, their homes, and their families. One day, however, they hear voices above in the middle of the day. Isaac looks out through the cracks in the wall, seeing Goeth and his dogs heading for their barracks. Knowing that the dogs would smell them instantly, Yanek makes a split-second decision to get out of the crawl space along with his friends and to replace the floorboard.

Gratz illustrates how connecting to other prisoners is lifesaving for Yanek because it allows him to regain his strength as well as parts of his identity. In talking about their homes and their families, the boys afford one another the ability to remember and express the most meaningful parts of their lives.

Yanek, Thomas, and Isaac come out of the barracks just as Goeth is entering. Goeth demands to know where they are going. Yanek explains that they were sent on a work detail to the south side of camp, trying not to shake. Goeth glares at Yanek but then walks by them. The boys run away as quickly as they can. Yanek thinks that in trying to survive, he's come very close to dying, and he resolves never to hide under the floorboards again.

The combination of Yanek's determination and luck once again comes into play. Yanek's insistence that they hide has allowed the boys to regain some of their strength. He also shows his bravery and fortitude in leaving the crawl space just in time and in lying to Goeth. However, Yanek is exceptionally lucky that Goeth does not choose to kill them on the spot here—and so he chooses not to test that luck again.

CHAPTER 13

One morning at roll call, Yanek is loaded onto a truck with 50 other prisoners and taken to an industrial-looking building. Yanek thinks that he recognizes one of the other men and asks if he's from Kraków. The man adamantly says no—he is "no one." As the prisoners are led into the building, Yanek realizes that it is actually the entrance to an enormous mine. As they descend in the elevator, Yanek feels trapped. One of the other prisoners says that they must be in the Wieliczka salt mine.

The man's reaction to Yanek's question makes it clear that Yanek is not the only one who understands the benefit of anonymity. As per Moshe's advice, it's beneficial for prisoners to be "no one" so that they don't stand out and risk being targeted. Meanwhile, the mystery of where the prisoners are being taken—and particularly Yanek's feeling of entrapment—highlight how the Nazis purposely keep the prisoners uninformed and disoriented as another tactic of abuse.

Yanek and the prisoners get a tour of the mine. The kapo shows them the room where they'll be working along with the picks, shovels, and carts. He warns that even though it might be easy to slip away to escape, the prisoners would never find their way back and would starve to death. Then, they come to another huge chamber, where they see dozens of figures—trolls, serpents, kings, queens, knights, chandeliers—all carved out of salt. Another prisoner explains that the miners carved it all—some statues are a thousand years old. Yanek is amazed that there could "still be beauty in the world." After the tour, they return to their barracks without dinner.

Yanek's amazement at the fact that there can "still be beauty in the world" reminds readers of just how destitute his condition is. The Nazis' cruelty is so thorough that many prisoners have lost all sense of joy and meaning in life. Even though Yanek is able to maintain determination, this provides key insight into how battling every day to survive makes everything else in the world seem insignificant.

As the prisoners return to their barracks, Yanek sees two men confront the man he recognized on the truck, demanding to know if he was one of the Judenrat policemen. Though the man denies it, Yanek recognizes him as Holtzman, the police officer who raided his family's apartment and brought the Nazis to his flat. Yanek is enraged. Holzman starts to panic, but a kapo quiets them. Yanek hears Holtzman crying softly in the barracks that night.

Yanek's fury is justified, as he recognizes how much pain Holtzman caused the Gruener family—particularly Mina—and others in the Kraków ghetto. The Judenrat, *who were still Jewish citizens, wrought terror and inhumanity upon other Jews, just as the Nazis did.*

The next morning, Yanek starts the work at the mine. As he chips away at the salt with his pickax, he hears a kapo cry out in terror. Yanek peers around the corner to see what has happened: Holtzman's head has been bashed in with a shovel, and the rest of his body is torn and bleeding, his cuts rubbed with salt. Yanek thinks of Abimelech in the book of Judges, who sowed the fields of his people with salt after he put down their rebellion. Yanek thinks that this is "punishment and purification, all in one."

Yanek continues to interpret what happens to him in life via the Hebrew Bible. Like Abimelech, the prisoners have punished Holtzman's betrayal with violence and salt, a symbol of "purification." But the punishment also calls to mind the idiom of "rubbing salt into one's wounds"—essentially, making an already bad situation worse. The other prisoners afford Holtzman no humanity since he afforded them none, but punishing him does nothing to alleviate their suffering.

The kapo demands to know who killed Holtzman, but no one admits to it. The kapo says he doesn't care if they kill each other, and he instructs two of the prisoners to dispose of the body. Yanek continues to work. That night, he dreams that the salt statues come to life and attack their captors—but all of the statues have Holtzman's face.

Yanek's dream underscores his immense desire to be free of the Nazis' cruelty. However, the fact that the statues have the face of Holtzman suggests that Yanek may be haunted by what happened to the man—indicating that he may agree with the deadly punishment that was afforded to Holtzman. As such, Yanek demonstrates his unique ability to retain his sense of humanity and compassion, even toward someone who betrays him. This inner strength could perhaps spare Yanek from completely losing touch with who he is and where he came from.

CHAPTER 14

Yanek is now at the Trzebinia concentration camp. One day, he and some other prisoners are tasked with moving an immense pile of large rocks from one side of a field to another, all the while being beaten by SS officers. Once it is complete, the officers tell the prisoners to move the pile back. Yanek was transferred to Trzebinia shortly after arriving at the salt mine. He thinks that Trzebinia is worse than the other camps, because the Nazis here like to play games, as if the prisoners are just toys. Yanek fumes as he starts to move the rocks back, but knows that if he allowed himself to be provoked he would be beaten as punishment.

The conditions at Trzebinia exhibit a new angle of the Nazis' cruelty. While other concentration camps primarily used fear tactics, at Trzebinia they play torturous games with the prisoners. This dynamic reaffirms how the Nazis do not view the Jews and other prisoners as people of any value—merely as a means of entertainment whose lives don't matter. Yanek, however, continues to show his determination and refuses to be provoked by the Nazis.

Yanek knows that to them the Jewish prisoners are "lower than animals," because they're disposable—more Jews will continue arriving at the camps to replace those who are killed. Yanek furiously thinks that he and the other prisoners shouldn't withstand this treatment. He thinks that they should not be trying to survive—they should be trying to *win*. He knows that the prisoners could overcome the Nazis if they all rose up at once, because there are more of them. He vows not to be killed without a fight.

Yanek's fury is born out of this understanding that the Nazis treat them as "lower than animals," and as though their lives are worthless. This knowledge is perhaps what motivates his determination a little too much, as he thinks about risking a rebellion against the Nazis. But given that the Nazis are armed while the prisoners are physically weak and defenseless, it's likely that only quiet acts of resistance and luck can truly ensure one's survival.

That night at roll call, another prisoner has the same thought as Yanek. Instead of allowing himself to be beaten, the man strikes one of the soldiers. Yanek looks around to see if anyone will join in, excited at the prospect, but no one does. The prisoner who fought back is instantly shot. The commandant hurries onto the grounds and accuses a boy next to the man who fought back of being part of the plot to escape. The boy protests, but the guards grab him. The commandant continues to call out people who he claims were part of the plot, randomly choosing them in a blind fury. Seven innocent people, including the boy, are brought up to the makeshift gallows in front of the yard.

Yanek is immediately provided with a lesson as to why it is better not to resist: the Nazis are so inhumane that to fight back means not only that the resister will die, but that others will as well. Additionally, this is another example that Gratz provides of how prisoners need luck in order to survive the camps. Even though the boy and the six other prisoners are completely innocent and did nothing wrong, they are randomly chosen to die as punishment for the first man's rebellion.

The boy sobs as they put a noose around his neck, arguing that he did nothing wrong. Yanek realizes then that fighting back only means dying quickly and putting others in harm's way. The boy's last words implore the other prisoners to remember that he did nothing—that he was innocent. The hangman kicks out the chair from under the boy, and the boy's body jerks. Yanek watches and vows never to forget the boy.

Just as Yanek knows that he must survive for the sake of his family, he also starts to understand part of the burden of the trauma that he is experiencing. As Yanek continues to mature and approach adulthood, he feels a sense of responsibility to remember others who have died, who are not able to grow up as he is.

CHAPTER 15

One day, Yanek is assigned to a quarry when the kapos abruptly change his work detail. He and the other prisoners are marched out of the camp and into a train car. They are packed in so tightly that Yanek feels crushed, gasping for air. One man starts to scream, gasping for breath, and when he exits the car he is shot immediately. Yanek works his way towards a ventilation grate on the wall of the car. Yanek stands there for half a day while prisoners are loaded into other cars. There is no food, no water, and no way to go to the bathroom.

The Nazis continue to devalue and dehumanize the Jews, packing them into car like animals without basic sustenance or hygienic conditions. Additionally, Yanek continues to show his determination in the face of this brutality. Rather than giving up or panicking, he thinks practically and finds a way to the ventilation grate so that he can breathe.

In the afternoon, the car starts to move. Yanek sees snow-covered fields whipping by. He is shocked to see glimpses of the outside world: "the world for non-Jews." Once, when they stop, a five-year-old Polish boy calls out to them, yelling that they'll be turned into soap. His older brother corrects him, announcing that they're being taken to the gas chambers. The boys then throw snowballs at them, for which Yanek is actually grateful, because he is dying of thirst. He licks the snow off his face and shirt. One man turns to another in the car and says that this is why they could never run away: the Polish people would sell them back to the Nazis for "a sack of potatoes."

Gratz illustrates how the brutality and cruelty of the Nazis is not the only discrimination that the Jews face. These two young boys demonstrate that prejudice can be learned at a very young age. The Non-Jewish Polish people view the prisoners as subhuman, their lives worth as little as "a sack of potatoes." This lack of human decency even from the people with whom they share a homeland is exceptionally discouraging, as it illustrates how anti-Semitism is widespread throughout Europe.

The car travels for another whole day, and still the prisoners have no food or water. Yanek drifts in and out of sleep, kept upright by the prisoners squeezed around him. Sometime later, Yanek wakes up to find that the man leaning on his shoulder is dead. Yanek tries to push him away, but they are too tightly packed, and he must endure the dead man's weight. Later, when Yanek awakens again, he sees that the ventilation grate near him is covered with snow, which eats greedily to get some water.

Gratz's descriptions of the brutality and cruelty of the Nazis continues to reach new depths. The conditions of the cattle car are so bad that there are people dying upright, and Yanek is desperate enough to eat snow in order to survive. Additionally, death has become so commonplace that Yanek is almost unphased by a dead man leaning against him.

Soon after, the train slows again, and another train filled with Jews stops alongside them. A prisoner from the other train asks what his train car says, as the trains have the destinations on them. Yanek calls out, saying their train is going to Treblinka. When he asks in return, the man says that Yanek's car is headed for Birkenau. A man close by explains that Birkenau isn't a work camp—it's a death camp. He suggests that when they arrive in the gas chambers, Yanek should try to stand under the exhaust vents, because he won't suffer as long before dying.

The news that Yanek's car is headed for Birkenau disturbs him deeply, as he knows that this likely means his death. This will likely prompt further despair in Yanek, given that all of his efforts and determination have seemingly been for nothing: he's done as much as he could to survive, and by sheer bad luck, all of that effort could go to waste.

CHAPTER 16

When the train arrives at Birkenau, Yanek can smell burning flesh in the air. The train sits for hours before the prisoners are let out. Yanek feels as though this is another form of torture, to drive them to panic or madness. Finally, the door opens and the prisoners are marched toward a big brick building with chimneys. Yanek thinks about how much he's done, how much he's already survived, only to have it taken all away by the Nazis. He begins to cry, wishing that he had let the Nazis kill him back in the ghetto.

When Yanek arrives at Birkenau, his determination faces its greatest challenge. It is easy to understand why he wishes he had given up: the Nazis' cruelty in this moment, sending innocent people knowingly to their deaths as they are unable to do anything about it, is unfathomable.

Yanek and the others are instructed to undress and then herded into the next room with the showerheads. Yanek moves as far away from them as he can. When the doors shut, people start to panic, yelling and cursing and beating on the doors. They wait, but no gas comes. Yanek starts to giggle in hysteria, thinking that the Nazis have finally broke him. He thinks that who lives and dies is completely random. One can "play the game perfectly and still lose, so why bother playing at all?"

It is here that Yanek recognizes how much of one's survival is contingent upon luck—a thought that fills him with despair. Even if one "plays the game" of trying to appease the Nazis and evade death, random chance can ruin all of one's efforts in an instant. Yanek knows the injustice of working so hard to survive, only to have one's life taken away due to a simple bad chance—like Moshe, or the boy who was hanged in Chapter 14. This thought makes him feel hopeless, as he posits that this makes his efforts worthless.

When the gas still doesn't come, Yanek moves over to a showerhead and yells at it, daring it to kill him. He thinks that he is ready to die, ready for this all to end. Suddenly, the pipes rattle, but instead of gas, water comes out. Yanek starts to laugh and cry at this reprieve. He thinks, in shock, that he's alive.

The fact that water comes out of the showers instead of gas is another lucky chance—one so profound that it has the potential to renew Yanek's faith in life. Even though his survival is contingent upon luck, the fact that he is lucky enough to have made it this far and continued to live could spur him to press on.

CHAPTER 17

Yanek thinks that he was ready to die, but when water came out of the showerheads, it was as though he had been born again. He becomes determined to keep surviving. After the shower, the Nazis shave the prisoners' heads and tattoo **numbers** onto their skin. Yanek is B-3087. Yanek thinks that he has become a number—not a person from Kraków, not the son of Oskar and Mina Gruener, not a person who loved books and science and American movies. He is no longer an individual, but he is glad he is still alive.

The Nazis continue to take actions that remove any identity from the prisoners, as Yanek acknowledges here. By shaving the prisoners' heads, the Nazis generalize them into a kind of animalistic herd rather than allowing them to be individuals. Tattooing numbers into their skin not only dehumanizes them further (being branded almost like cattle)—it also relegates them to a number rather than a full, meaningful human identity.

After Yanek is tattooed, he's taken to another room with prisoner uniforms. He gets pants that are too short and a shirt that is too long, but he is lucky to get a pair of wooden shoes that fit. The barracks are worse than any he has lived in: shelves with no mattresses, pillows, or blankets. Still, Yanek is grateful to be alive. Yanek spots a small wooden horse in the barracks, a children's toy. He wonders if the child had left their horse behind so that some part of them "might survive and be remembered."

Yanek's ability to get shoes that fit him serves as another lucky chance that proves integral to his survival. Given the hard labor and other physical trials that the prisoners are up against, having well-fitting shoes is necessary to avoid injury or punishment for lagging behind. Meanwhile, Yanek's recognition that a child may have left the horse so that a part of them "might survive and be remembered" is a testament to how the prisoners' identities are stripped from them and how terrifying it feels to be forgotten in death.

A man in their barracks announces that there is a boy who is 13, and he asks for 10 men to perform a bar mitzvah. Some prisoners dismiss the man, but Yanek realizes how important it is, so he offers to participate. After Yanek's offer, another man agrees as well, followed by another, until eventually 10 are found. Yanek realizes that although the boy looks young, Yanek is only a few years older than him. Yanek remembers his own bar mitzvah, "a lifetime ago."

The boy's bar mitzvah offers Yanek (and readers) an opportunity to reflect on his own bar mitzvah in the Kraków ghetto a few years prior, and how much has happened in the interim. Yanek has already survived three concentration camps and countless near-death experiences—trauma that amounts to Yanek feeling like he's experienced "a lifetime."

At the end of the bar mitzvah, Yanek goes up to the boy and gives him the small wooden horse as a gift. He tells him that they are alive, and he affirms that they cannot let the Nazis erase them from the world or from history. Yanek says this in memory of Uncle Moshe, Oskar, Mina, and his other family members. He thinks that like the boy, he is a new man today, and that he'll survive.

The maturity that Yanek has gained is on full display here. He takes on the determination and sense of responsibility that Moshe left for him as he becomes determined not to let the Nazis eliminate the Jews from the world's memory. Thus, Gratz also illustrates how Yanek's coming of age is contingent upon the obligation to remember those he's lost and to survive in honor of them.

CHAPTER 18

Yanek washes himself at the water pump, despite the bitter cold. He's decided that every day, despite the fact that he has no soap and no **toothbrush**, he'll wash himself and even rub his teeth with his fingers, to remind himself of what it's like to be human. He notes a sign that the Nazis have posted above the pump, explaining the importance of maintaining cleanliness or else they would die. He thinks that one could still keep oneself clean and do everything right and still be killed—but he'll play the game.

Yanek's yearning for a toothbrush represents his loss of humanity as a prisoner—but also his determination to retain some semblance of normalcy. The fact that the Nazis do not provide the prisoners with these symbols of basic hygiene and decency serves as another illustration of how they're treated as animals rather than humans.

At Birkenau, Yanek builds new barracks, and the work is just as bad as everywhere else. There is little food, and the **bread** is hard and bland. Yanek learns a trick with the soup they serve, which is to wait a bit before lining up for it. This way, he gets the heartier parts of the soup which sink to the bottom—which might just keep him alive.

Yanek's trick with the soup is another indication of his determination, and how he can create his own luck in some ways. By observing when he is more fortunate and gets thicker soup, Yanek is able to determine that waiting allows him to eat something more substantive that will give him a bit more strength.

The prisoners also learn to use the bathroom during the day so they can use the camp latrines rather than the barrels in the barracks. The same prisoners stand guard at the bathroom door each day, and so the prisoners use them to deliver secret messages for other prisoners. One day, Yanek sees the watchman whisper "tonight" to another prisoner, and that night, there is a prison break. Yanek prays that they get out. The remaining prisoners are assembled and their numbers are read. The Nazis are furious at the break-out. Yanek wonders then if he could make it, too. They stand at roll call for hours.

The prison break gives Yanek hope, as he sees that other prisoners are able to band together in order to try to escape the Nazis. But given the previous failures Yanek has witnessed, it's likely that he'll realize his acts of resistance and solidarity must be more subtle, so as not to incur the further wrath of the Nazis.

At dawn, a ragged bunch of prisoners are marched back inside: they didn't make it. The men are lined up against a wall in the yard and are immediately shot. Then other prisoners in their work detail are pulled out and shot us as well—men who did nothing besides work alongside those who tried to escape. Then, the officer turns his gun on the roll call, explaining that this is the punishment for trying to escape. Yanek prays that the bullets wouldn't hit him, but he knows that he cannot run. The officer shoots until he runs out of bullets, after which he orders the remaining prisoners to clean up the dead.

Like the man who fought back in Trzebinia, this attempt to thwart the Nazis plan only results in more punishment. This is one of the reasons that it is so difficult to form relationships in the camps: even working alongside someone can be grounds for getting killed. Additionally, luck is once again proven to be crucial: despite being shot at by the officer, Yanek just happens to be one of the prisoners who makes it out alive.

That night, Yanek dreams that Amon Goeth is chasing him with his dogs, and Yanek is unable to get away. One of the dogs leaps up and bites his left arm. Yanek wakes up screaming, holding his left arm, where the Nazis had tattooed **B-3087** onto his skin.

Yanek's dream is a summation of his pain and his fears. It highlights the fact that despite all of his efforts (how hard he might try to escape the dogs), he still may not survive the war. It also emphasizes the cruelty and violence of the Nazis, and the way in which Yanek he has been stripped of his identity, as represented by his number.

CHAPTER 19

After a few months at Birkenau, Yanek is transferred to Auschwitz because they need more workers. On the prisoners' march to Auschwitz, they stop at the train station, where new Jews—with real clothes, luggage, and children—arrive. Yanek feels deeply sorry for the new arrivals, who look at the gaunt prisoners with wide eyes. Yanek thinks that these people will soon look like him.

Comparing the new arrivals with the prisoners like Yanek helps Gratz illustrate the extent of the toll of the Nazis' brutality. Providing readers with a glimpse into each group's reaction to each other shows how the new prisoners still have their innocence and their humanity, in contrast to Yanek, who is much wearier and dehumanized.

The prisoners are then marched to Auschwitz and then assembled in the yard. One Auschwitz prisoner tells them quietly that young people should say that they are 18, in good health, and have a trade. The family in front of Yanek in line, who have just arrived off the train, don't understand the advice. The Nazi doctor, Josef Mengele, interviews the man, who explains that his wife had pneumonia recently and that his son is only nine. Mengele tells the man to go to the right and the woman and boy to go to the left. The woman and boy protest, but soldiers keep them apart.

Given how Yanek was separated from his own family, it's likely that he feels immense sympathy for the man who loses his wife and child. Again, this cruelty points to the inhumanity of the Nazis as they detach families and murder those who are not able to work. The only thing that gives the Jews value in the Nazis' eyes is the physical labor they can produce, again likening them to nothing more than animals.

Mengele then asks Yanek how old he is. Though Yanek is only 16, he says 18, that he is healthy, and that he is a bricklayer. Yanek is sorted to the right as well. Yanek sees the man in front of him ask where his wife and son are going. A kapo explains that they're going to the gas chambers, and that he should shut up unless he wants to join them. Someone whispers to him to save his own life and let them go.

The man's inability to help his family shows the heartbreaking consequences of forced isolation. Even though the man loves his family and doesn't want to let them die, he immediately understands that any form of protest will only result in his own death as well. Thus, he must disconnect from his family in order to survive.

When the selection is finished, Mengele addresses Yanek's group, saying that they are strong enough to be selected for work. He explains that once the Jews are collected, they will organize a new Jewish state where they will be free. Mengele also says that their valuables are being used for the benefit of the Jewish people. The new prisoners nod, buying it. Yanek doesn't have to heart to tell them that these are all lies. That night, in his bunk, Yanek hears a lullaby his mother used to sing in the distance. The man next to him explains that the women sing when mothers and their children are taken to the gas chambers—they sing "all day, and every night."

This is a particularly manipulative form of cruelty, as the Nazis spread deceitful myths about their plans for Jews in the future. The reality, as Yanek knows well, is that the Nazis plan to eliminate Jews completely, but the new arrivals still have hope in the idea of a humane world and therefore are more inclined to believe it. Back in the barracks, Yanek understands that the women in the camps know better: their song is in mourning for all of the women and children who have died, and their grief over the lack of humanity in the camps. The fact that they sing "all day, and every night" reflects the depths of the prisoners' despair and the constant suffering and death that surrounds them.

CHAPTER 20

One morning, Yanek notices the man in the bunk next to him is dead. Another prisoner around Yanek's age suggests that they go through his pockets for **bread**; they find a lice-ridden piece and share it. The boy introduces himself as Fred, and Yanek tells him his own name. Yanek realizes that he hadn't spoken his name to anyone for as long as he can remember, and the two shake hands. Yanek thinks that it feels good to make a connection.

Though Yanek has been anonymous for a long time following Moshe's death, Fred's friendship affords him the opportunity to feel like a human being again. Gratz illustrates here how connecting with someone and maintaining one's identity are related to one another, as each adds to Yanek's emotional wellbeing and allows him to regain a sense of meaning in life.

Yanek and Fred are assigned to the same work detail, and Fred starts to ask Yanek questions about himself. Yanek remembers Moshe's warning, but he also recognizes how nice it had been to talk with Isaac and Thomas. Yanek tells Fred a little about himself, and they discover that they grew up not too far from each other. They also start to talk about what they'll do when they get out of the camps—like buy fresh **bread** and other food. They laugh together as their stomachs rumble.

Fred continues to give Yanek the opportunity to not only form a meaningful and supportive relationship in a place where that rarely exists, but also to give him a part of his own identity back as they speak about their past lives. Relating this to Yanek's friendship with Isaac and Thomas reminds readers that Yanek has been able to find those meaningful relationships at other times as well—proving their benefit again and again.

Soon, Fred and Yanek are inseparable, and Yanek thinks how good it is to have a friend. But one day he notices that Fred has very little energy and doesn't want to eat. He gives his **bread** to Yanek, but Yanek saves it for him to eat the next day. The next day, Fred is very sick, but he can't go to the camp clinic—people never came back. The day after, Fred can't get out of bed. The kapo comes in and tells Fred to get up, dragging him to roll call. The kapos haul him in front of the assembly yard, at the gallows. He's so weak he can't even stand. Yanek starts to cry as he watches the Nazis hang Fred. That night, Yanek says a prayer for Fred as he eats the bread and makes another vow to never forget his friend.

Of course, building a meaningful relationship with another person can come at a cost, as it did when Yanek lost Moshe. Fred's death is just another dimension of the Nazis' cruelty, as they kill him simply for being sick. Just as with the boy who was unjustly hanged at Trzebinia, Yanek feels the imperative to remember Fred because he could not survive. Additionally, bread recurs as a symbol of wellbeing. Even though Fred could not survive, he is able to give Yanek some support—both tangibly in the bread's physical sustenance, and in the emotional support of his friendship.

CHAPTER 21

One morning, the prisoners in Auschwitz are told that workers are needed in Sachsenhausen. Yanek suspects that this is because the Allied planes and bombs are getting closer, and they are trying to move the prisoners out of Poland and into Germany. The prisoners are told that they must walk because there are no trains—a good sign that the war is ending, but a terrible fate for the prisoners. They have no idea how far they'll have to walk.

As the war nears to an end, conditions do not improve for Yanek and the other prisoners—if anything, they are worse. The Nazis continue to put the prisoners through a torturous and grueling march. There is so much death, as Yanek explains, that they begin to call it a "death march." Yet the Nazis are completely uncaring about how many of the prisoners die along the way, as this simply plays into their desire to eliminate the Jews.

The Nazis give each prisoner half a loaf of **bread** for the whole trip. Yanek resolves to eat a bit at a time, to make it last. He and the others march for hours upon hours. Those who cannot keep up are shot and left by the road. Those without shoes are the first to die because of how cold it is, which makes Yanek grateful that he has wooden clogs. There is no water: the prisoners eat the snow that falls on them most days, and at night they sleep on top of one another for warmth.

During the march, Gratz illustrates both Yanek's luck and his fierce determination. Yanek has been lucky to get a pair of shoes that fits; without them, he would not survive. But he walks for hours on end despite the cold and the hunger, learning ways to cope with both so that he might be able to survive.

Five or six days into the march, the prisoners collectively grow exhausted. Yanek sees that they look like skeletons. He recognizes that "all these half-dead creatures around [him] had been people." He wonders which had been doctors, or teachers, or musicians. Yanek realizes that he's spent six years as a prisoner. He would have been thinking about a career or university—but the years preparing for that had been stolen from him.

As Yanek looks around him, he sees how much the Nazis have taken from them. Not only have they been dehumanized, but any markers of identity have been completely taken from them. His observation that the prisoners are now "half-dead creatures" rather than human beings emphasizes how this loss of humanity effectively kills people even before they're physically dead. As Yanek realizes that he might have been finishing school soon, Gratz reminds readers that Yanek is still just a teenager, despite having matured so much due to the suffering and horror he has experienced.

In the distance, Yanek sees Allied planes dropping bombs. He wants to cheer them on but knows he cannot. One of the prisoners starts to sing in Czech. Yanek is sure the Nazis will shoot him, but they let him continue. Another prisoner joins in. Another sings in Polish; others in German, Italian and French. They sing a hundred different songs, and the Nazis let them sing. Yanek wonders if the Nazis might also miss the way the world was before the war.

This moment of singing in the face of immense trauma shows how, despite the dehumanization that the Jews have experienced, they are able to retain some of their humanity through songs that connect them to their respective cultures. And as Yanek observes, perhaps there are people in the Nazi regimes who preferred life before the war but (like the prisoners) found it difficult to rebel in the face of their government's cruelty.

CHAPTER 22

Nine or 10 days into the march, Yanek notices another boy about his age who looks like he is about to collapse. He falls farther and farther toward the back of the line. Yanek keeps looking back at the boy, who reminds him of Fred. Yanek slows down and tells the boy that he has to walk faster. The boy stumbles and falls into Yanek, and Yanek takes some of his weight, though he can barely keep himself upright.

Yanek's gesture to the boy indicates that even in the face of the Nazis' cruelty, and even as the prisoners are placed in the most destitute of conditions, Yanek can subtly resist by extending kindness and humanity to others.

Yanek thinks back to Moshe's warning, wondering why he is wasting his energy saving another boy when he should be worried about saving himself. But Yanek acknowledges that the boy has a face and a name—Yanek thinks, "He could have been me." Yanek appeals to other marchers, asking for help to carry the boy, but no one does. Yanek thinks that it doesn't have to be every man for himself, that if they all helped one another, they could be stronger and more of them could survive.

Yanek understands Moshe's warning, knowing that he would be better off if he simply let the boy fend for himself. Yet he recognizes that if they all tried to support one another, they could save one another's lives and resist the Nazis together. Additionally, Yanek's connection to the boy is tied to identity—knowing that he could easily end up as just another anonymous corpse to the other prisoners, he does for the boy what he would want others to do for him.

Yanek walks for hours with the boy leaning on him. Yanek is desperate for **bread**—but to eat it, he would have to let the boy go. He thinks that he might not make it, and if he fell, he would never be able to get the boy up again. But just when Yanek thinks that he can't take another step, another older man takes part of the boy's weight. Yanek cries, unable to express his gratitude.

Yanek's efforts show how, just as he stepped up for the boy's bar mitzvah in Birkenau, stepping up here prompts others to also act in solidarity with one another. Gratz demonstrates that Yanek's thoughts are right: the more they work together, they more they are able to survive.

When they finally stop for the night, Yanek sets the boy down and the old man disappears quickly. Yanek reaches for his **bread** tucked into his pants, only to discover that it fell out while they were walking. He sobs, unsure of how he will survive without it—he's furious at the boy. Yanek thinks that if not for the boy, he would not have wasted all his energy and lost his food. Then Yanek sees a lump in the boy's pocket: the boy's bread. Yanek reaches for it, but he stops himself, unable to steal from the boy. He thinks that the boy will probably die by morning, and then he can take the bread.

Gratz continues to tie Yanek's bread to his wellbeing—not only physically, but emotionally. Without the prospect of sustenance, Yanek is desperate and isn't sure how he will continue. This is another example of how determination isn't the only key to success. Yanek tried to make sure he could ration the bread to keep him sustained, but an unlucky break nearly results in his death.

The next morning, Yanek discovers that the boy is still alive, and he looks much better than the day before. Yanek shakes with anger, wishing that the boy had died. Then Yanek is aghast at his own thoughts, wondering, "What had the Nazis turned me into?" Yanek realizes that he would rather steal than wish someone dead, and he reaches for the boy's **bread**. The boy wakes, and Yanek tells him that he was just checking that he was alive. The boy pushes Yanek away before Yanek can explain that he is the one who helped him the day before. Yanek then picks himself up: even though he is starving, he is not a *Muselmann* yet.

Yanek's inner monologue illuminates how easy it is to lose one's values while subject to the Nazis' cruelty. In giving himself two options—steal from a boy or wish him dead so that he can take his bread guilt-free—Yanek sees that he has lost some of the morality and humanity that once grounded him. But even in spite of this desperation, starvation, and the feeling that he is losing his values, Yanek keeps his determination in the hopes that one day he can regain them.

CHAPTER 23

Three days later, Yanek arrives at Sachsenhausen camp. Luckily, the Nazis do not make the prisoners work immediately, instead sending them to the barracks with soup and **bread**. At night, even though Yanek shares a bed with five other men, he falls asleep instantly, grateful to be out of the cold. The next day, Yanek sees that the camp is filled with corpses stacked on top of each other. Yanek washes at the pump, and he remembers out of the blue the first day his mother brought home a **toothbrush** for him. He marvels at how amazing it was to own this simple object.

Yanek receives another lucky break, in that the soldiers at Sachsenhausen allow them to rest. If they'd been made to work immediately, this could have meant Yanek's death after going three days without food. However, Yanek's memory of the toothbrush emphasizes the lack of hygiene and basic human decency at the camps, as something as basic as a toothbrush now seems like the height of luxury.

Yanek lines up for roll call, and the prisoners are made to stand for hours in the snow. One man wipes the sleet from his face, and the Nazis order him to give a "Sachsenhausen salute," forcing him to squat with his hands out in front of him. If he moved, he would be killed. It is only later, when the prisoners have forgotten about him, that the man falls over—unconscious or dead. The guards drag him away. After this, one of the prisoners breaks off and throws himself onto the electric barbed wire, killing himself. The Germans laugh, inviting others to follow.

This incident is yet another example of how the Nazis' cruelty and injustice knowing no bounds. The prisoner did nothing other than wipe the sleet from his face, and yet he is condemned to die for it. Additionally, the prisoner's suicide here indicates the extent of their horrific treatment—for him, dying a painful death by electrocution is better than continuing to endure the torture of the Nazis.

After roll call, Yanek and the others are put to work breaking rocks. At lunch, six young men are pulled away from their watery soup and hard **bread**. They nervously wonder what's going to happen, only to discover that they are being taken to the soldier's canteen. There they are made to sing for an hour as the soldiers laugh and talk and eat enormous meals. That afternoon, Yanek chops firewood, telling himself that every swing brings him closer to the arrival of the Allies. Yanek hopes that the war will end before the Nazis kill him.

Even though Yanek is continually subjected to starvation and humiliation, he is able to keep his determination. He knows that he is not far from liberation, so long as he can stay alive to see it. This knowledge fuels him, and keeping that optimism is crucial to ensuring that he can stay alive.

CHAPTER 24

Soon after, Yanek is shipped by cattle car to Bergen-Belsen. When he and the other prisoners arrive, the commandant is disappointed by how weak they all look, and he starts to point at prisoners to separate them. Yanek is devastated not to be picked, until he watches as the ones who have been chosen are gunned down. He realizes that the prisoners who had been chosen were the weakest, not the strongest—Yanek just can't tell the difference. The commandant then says that they will not work for a week so that they can get their strength back.

Again, Yanek's luck prevails in keeping him alive. Despite the fact that there is no discernable difference to him between strong and weak prisoners, Yanek is chosen to continue to work, while the others are killed. He then gets an additional lucky break in the relative leniency of the commandant—stopping work for a weak so that they can regain their strength.

At first Yanek thinks this is a trick, but to his relief, the commandant is telling the truth. They are fed fresh **bread** and the thickest soup Yanek had eaten in six years. Slowly, Yanek begins to get stronger. He also notes that there is no gas chamber or chimneys burning bodies, and he thinks that Bergen-Belsen may be better than the other camps. A week later, he is put back to work chopping wood, breaking rocks, and building new camp buildings.

The lucky breaks that Yanek experiences at Bergen-Belsen help him to survive and to fuel his determination in turn. Thus, Gratz continues to illustrate how it is a combination of these factors that enables Yanek to survive the many camps at which he is interned.

One day, Yanek is working when a kapo calls him over. The kapo, who has a large, round face covered in acne scars, punches Yanek in the face for no reason. The man explains that Yanek looked at him funny. Yanek's nose gushes blood. Another prisoner tells him that the kapo's name is Moonface—and that people say he killed three men before the war.

Moonface provides an obstacle to Yanek's determination: Moonface deliberately targets him, despite the fact that he has tried to remain anonymous. This serves as an unlucky break—and given that Moonface was allegedly murderous even before he was a kapo, it's one that could get Yanek killed.

Yanek tries to avoid Moonface after that, though he can tell that Moonface is watching him. Moonface kicks and beats Yanek whenever he has the chance. Yanek realizes he has to get away, even though Bergen-Belsen is a better camp. When the Nazis round up prisoners to be sent to another camp, they hold a race to determine which of the prisoners is fit enough to be transferred. Yanek runs for his life across the barracks. The guards say that he can work, so they transfer him to another camp.

In instances like these, Gratz illustrates that Yanek's determination can also fuel his luck—not just the other way around. Yanek's immense efforts to make sure that he gets transferred give him the opportunity to escape Moonface's torment—a lucky break that may save his life.

CHAPTER 25

Yanek arrives at Buchenwald and sees that the prisoners are terrified. Yanek carries rocks, learning to carry a stone just the right size—if it is too large and he dropped it, the Nazis would shoot him. If it was too small, they would shoot him for being lazy. Some of the Jews are chained to carts and "whipped like animals" while they haul loads of stones.

Yanek continues to learn the "game" of the camps, ensuring that he can continue to survive by picking just the right size rock to carry. Again, his descriptions of how the Nazis treat the prisoners "like animals" reinforces their dehumanization of the Jews, a theme that is especially prevalent at Buchenwald.

Yanek is quickly introduced to the Buchenwald zoo, the idea of the camp's commandant, Karl Koch, and his wife Ilse. The fenced-in area has deer, monkeys, and bears—entertainment for the guards and their families. The prisoners stand at roll call next to the zoo, and Yanek wonders if the children and their mothers think that the Jews are animals too. One day, the Nazi gives the prisoners the chance to get a raw steak that would normally be fed to the bears, dropping it in the mud between two men and telling them to fight for it, which they do. Yanek thinks that the zoo animals are treated better than the prisoners.

The zoo invites further comparison between the prisoners and the animals. Yanek acknowledges how the poor treatment they experience—the fact that they are frequently treated even worse than animals—leads them to feel as though they are becoming subhuman. As Yanek observes the fight between the two prisoners over the steak, he recognizes that they are acting this way only because of the cruelty and the inhumane treatment that they are experiencing.

One day, Yanek is washing himself at the pump when he sees two SS officers lure a deer to the fence, then tie its antlers to the fence so that it can't escape and leave it there. Yanek thinks that he had seen the Nazis do unimaginably cruel things, but seeing the deer thrashing around while tied to the fence enrages him. However, he can't do anything to rescue it. At roll call, the two officers are pulled off duty by the commandant and have their zoo privileges taken away—the Nazis won't abide cruelty to animals.

The deer symbolizes the idea that the Jews are powerless to fight the Nazis—which Yanek even acknowledges explicitly in being unable to help the animal. Yet this episode is also another reinforcement of the idea that the prisoners are treated worse than the animals: the Nazis have no problem with cruelty to human beings, yet they won't tolerate cruelty to animals.

At roll call a few days later, Yanek is told that the prisoners are being moved again: Gross-Rosen needs workers, and there were no new shipments of prisoners. The Nazis had killed so many people that they're running out of Jews.

Again, this small statement represents another reminder of the Nazis' anti-Semitism and mass genocide: they have killed so many Jews that they don't have enough to work in all of their prisons.

CHAPTER 26

This time, Yanek travels by train—though many prisoners still die on the trip. Yanek hardly notices the death all around him anymore. He tries to sleep as much as possible to take his mind off of starvation. Yanek hears planes flying over the train and a bomb exploding nearby. For a moment, Yanek thinks that he wants the bombs to strike the train, so this nightmare would end.

Yanek's momentary lapse in determination, as he hopes that the bombs hit their train car, makes it clear just how grueling his journey has been. Even after surviving so much, he wavers on whether he wants to keep going. But the fortune that a bomb does not strike the train allows Yanek to keep going.

When Yanek arrives at Gross-Rosen, however, his determination kicks in again: he wants to work and survive. Yanek builds more barracks, but with the Allies so close, he thinks that one day there he'll have a "bright, shining, beautiful future," where he can have three full meals a day, a family, and laughter. He works so that one day he could have that future.

Yanek's thoughts illustrate his determination as he passes a turning point. With the Allies approaching, he finally lets himself be a little optimistic about having a "beautiful future" beyond his suffering. These tangible desires—being able to recover his humanity, connecting to people again, and having an identity and meaning in his life—spur Yanek even further.

A kapo interrupts Yanek's reverie, asking where the top button on his shirt is. When Yanek realizes it is missing and says he doesn't know, the kapo explains that the penalty for losing a button is 20 lashes. At roll call, a Nazi soldier lashes Yanek with a whip, instructing him to keep count. When Yanek starts in Polish, the soldier says he should count in German, and starts again. Yanek gets 10 lashes, his back erupting in pain. But Yanek forgets the German word for 11 and the soldier criticizes his "Jewish schools," making Yanek start the count over.

This is yet another example of the Nazis' cruel games: for such trivial mishaps as missing a button or not knowing the German word for eleven, Yanek is brutally punished. It's also clear from the soldier's comment about "Jewish schools," that their actions are motivated by anti-Semitism as he discriminates against Yanek's heritage.

Yanek remembers very little after the lashes are finished, not even knowing how many he eventually had. When he is carried back to the barracks, he immediately passes out. He dreams that he is in a bright field on a beautiful summer day. But then clouds roll in, and thunder rumbles. Lighting flashes, and the ground cracks open. He falls into a black abyss, and rocks fall in after him. He counts the rocks in German as they strike him.

Yanek's dream serves as a metaphor for his dire situation. He hopes for and is determined to reach a future in which he can simply enjoy a beautiful sunny day—but the storms and the rocks (which symbolize the Nazis and the other obstacles in his way) threaten that future.

Suddenly, Yanek wakes from his dream and discovers that bombs are falling all around. The prisoners are all awake, waiting to see if the bombs will hit them. But eventually, the prisoners go back to sleep despite the shattering sound, knowing that there is work tomorrow. Yanek lays on his stomach, his back in agony, and remembers his dream. He is determined not to fall down the hole. He wants to be there when the Allies arrive.

Yanek's dream incites his intention to survive even further, as he vows to overcome the obstacles in his way. The irony in Yanek's dream is that what he interpreted as thunder in his nightmare—the sounds of the bombs—actually represent his salvation as the Allies get closer, providing a glimmer of hope for him.

CHAPTER 27

The prisoners are moved once more to a camp called Dachau. Once again, Yanek will be forced to march. It is almost spring, but the ground is still frozen, and Yanek is again grateful that he has shoes. The sides of the road are strewn with corpses. Yanek wonders who else uses the road, and whether they care about the bodies piling up around them. They pass through villages, where Yanek sees many doorways with Nazi flags.

Once again, Yanek's shoes prove to be a lucky break that allow him to survive another death march. Additionally, Gratz returns to an idea that he explored when Yanek was on the train car to Birkenau and saw the two young boys. It is not only the Nazis who are anti-Semitic, but the German citizens who see the horrors of what is happening and choose to ignore it, who also bear some responsibility for the cruelty that is taking place.

The route to Dachau takes them through Czechoslovakia before going back into Germany, and this part of the journey is different—the Nazis are warier of trouble. The Czech people have also left small forms of resistance: **bread** left out on windowsills and doorways for the prisoners to find. Some villagers hang out of their windows and throw what they can to the prisoners. Their kindness in the face of the soldiers, who grow angry at these offerings, warms Yanek's heart. The Czech people prove to him that goodness still exists.

In Czechoslovakia, by contrast, the citizens are actively resisting against the Nazis and are trying to help the prisoners. Like Yanek, they understand that outright rebellion would be futile, but that small acts of solidarity with the prisoners go a long way to buoying them physically and reminding them that there is humanity and goodness in the world.

Yanek marches for three more days, but he isn't able to get to any food before other prisoners. He sees a kapo ahead of him with four loaves of **bread**—more than enough for one person. Yanek wonders if he could talk the man into giving him some. But when Yanek walks up to the kapo, he sees that it is Moonface: the man who had beaten him at every opportunity at Bergen-Belsen. Yanek quickly backs away, ready to cry over his bad luck. He knows that if he doesn't eat by the end of the day, he will die.

Yanek initially views the fact that Moonface has returned as a stroke of bad luck, as he thinks that Moonface will be less inclined to help him because of their history. This is a prime instance in which Yanek believes that being anonymous would be much more advantageous than standing out to Moonface.

That night, when they stop, Yanek decides to be brave and tentatively approaches Moonface as he eats his **bread**. Moonface appears to recognize him. Yanek explains that he wants to work, but that he won't survive without some bread. Yanek asks if Moonface could share some of his. Moonface takes out a knife and presses it against Yanek's throat. After a long minute, Moonface pulls the knife away and cuts off a hunk of his loaf, tossing it to Yanek. Yanek nods gratefully and runs away to eat it, his heart racing. He is amazed that Moonface decided to be generous for once.

Despite Yanek's dread at approaching Moonface due to their past interactions, Moonface's recognition of Yanek may have been the very thing that saved him. This is a key example of how Yanek needs both determination and luck in order to survive: determination in order to ask for the bread, and luck in the fact that Moonface chooses to help him rather than kill him for asking.

CHAPTER 28

The prisoners march another three days. On their sixth day of marching, they are brought to a depot and loaded into train cars. Poles are put in one, and Jews in another, with a third for the documents that kept track of the prisoners. After a day and night on the train, Yanek is awakened by the sounds of an explosion. The train breaks screech to a halt, and soon the prisoners learn that the third car, with all their documents, has been destroyed. Yanek gets an idea: he rips the seams holding the Jewish star on his uniform and dirties the spot that it had covered.

Yanek proves his ingenuity and determination once again. Seizing on a lucky break—in which all of the documents of the prisoners are destroyed—Yanek tries to then improve his situation by pretending that he is a Polish prisoner rather than a Jewish one. This serves as another example in which luck can fuel Yanek's actions and help him attempt to survive even further.

When the train stops outside Dachau, Yanek switches from the group of Jews to the group of Poles, knowing they'll have no way of verifying who he was. Yanek lies and says that his name is Yan Zielony—a Polish name. The Nazis write down his name and **number** and continue on. But then, a Polish prisoner tells the soldier that Yanek is a Jew, and that he saw Yanek switch sides. Yanek tries to protest, but he is immediately shoved back over to the Jewish side. Yanek wonders why the man ratted him out despite having nothing to gain by it. He realizes that the man had told on him simply because Yanek is a Jew.

In this instance, Yanek's lack of identity—being reduced to a number—might prove an advantage as he uses the Nazis' own system against them. Despite Yanek's luck and his determination, however, he is prevented from switching sides by this Polish prisoner. This reinforces how even other Polish prisoners, who are essentially experiencing the same thing that Yanek is, bear the same anti-Semitism as the Germans—despite the fact that Yanek is Polish, too.

CHAPTER 29

When Yanek arrives at Dachau, he discovers that typhus is raging through the camp. Prisoners are dying by the hundreds, and the Nazis do nothing to treat them. Yanek thinks that it is a miracle that he does not get sick. The one reprieve is that the prisoners do not have to work, and some days they don't even have roll call. The war is coming to an end; the Germans are only moving the prisoners around to avoid the Allies.

Again, Yanek's survival at Dachau is due mostly to luck: he could just as easily have succumbed to typhus like so many of the other prisoners, despite his consistent determination to live. Yanek himself acknowledges his luck in not getting sick by describing it as a "miracle," grateful that he is able to survive after enduring so much hardship already.

One night in early spring, Yanek wakes to the sounds of deafeningly loud explosions close by. The planes roar for hours, and Yanek hears bullets firing. He hopes that he can survive a little longer. Then, close to dawn, the shooting and explosions stop, and Yanek goes back to sleep. In the morning, however, the prisoners discover that there are no kapos or guards around—the Nazis fled in the night.

It is here that Yanek's personal war finally ends. He and the other surviving prisoners were able to keep their determination alive, as Gratz emphasizes again here, but the previous chapters have also illustrated that an immense amount of luck was involved in Yanek's survival—many others did not live simply because they weren't as lucky.

Yanek and the other prisoners look around the yard, not knowing what to do. Yanek has no home or family to go back to, and no way to get there. He wonders who would be kind to him, a Jew, considering that no one ever stood up for him before he was interned. Yanek realizes that although he and the other prisoners are free, they are still powerless.

Even in freedom, Yanek's primary concern is the anti-Semitism that has been rampant not only in Germany and by the Nazis, but what he has seen from others. The Nazi regime's cruelty has radiated outward to influence ordinary civilians, and so the Jewish prisoners are still unsafe regardless of their newfound freedom.

Then, someone spots soldiers, and Yanek steels himself to be killed by the Germans—their last act to exterminate the Jews. But the soldiers are wearing green, not gray and brown, and the tank has an American flag on it. Yanek falls to his knees and weeps in shock and gratitude that he had actually survived. An American soldier hurries over to him and asks in German what his name is. Yanek replies that his name is Yanek. The American soldier address him by name and assures him that he's going to be okay.

Yanek finally feels a wave of relief wash over him in recognizing that all of his efforts over the years have been worth it. The American soldier asking Yanek his name provides a particularly moving sense of closure to this chapter of Yanek's life. No longer is he reduced a number, which has symbolized a loss of identity and individuality. Now, he can be Yanek Gruener once more and can regain a meaningful life along with this identity.

CHAPTER 30

The Americans immediately take the survivors away from Dachau. They travel by train to Munich, where the Allies will house them temporarily. When Yanek is shown his new room, he asks how many people he has to share the bunk with. The soldier replies that he'll have it to himself, which shocks Yanek. He's further amazed when the soldier give him a blanket, a pillow, sheets, a washcloth, a cup, and a **toothbrush**. Yanek cries as he picks up the toothbrush, remembering the day at the water pump when he'd marveled at the luxury of this simple object. He feels that the Americans are granting him his life back.

As Yanek gains small pieces of his life back, Gratz illustrates how regaining even small things like a toothbrush or a pillow can be incredibly meaningful to someone who had endured inhumane conditions. These "gifts," as Yanek calls them, highlight how simple human decency can return that sense of humanity to those who felt that they had lost it. The toothbrush is particularly poignant for Yanek because he thought of it as an immense luxury during his time in the camps as—one that he would never take for granted again.

That night in the dining hall, Yanek sits in a chair at a table for the first time in six years. He looks at the silverware reverently. Yanek is amazed at the food they are brought: roast beef, mashed potatoes, gravy, and rolls. A man at the table starts to cry, and the Americans don't know what to do. Yanek asks him to pass the salt, and the man looks up and starts to laugh through his tears. Yanek wonders if the Americans, or anyone, could ever understand how amazing this simple meal was.

Again, basic human needs like silverware, tables and chairs, and even the food itself allow the survivors to regain their sense of humanity. Where once they had fought one another for food, now they are able to recognize that they can treat one another with kindness and courtesy because their lives are no longer threatened at every moment.

As they eat, Yanek thinks back to the day the war began, eating with his family in his old apartment in Kraków. He remembers Mina, Oskar, Uncle Moshe, Aunt Gizela, and the rest of his family. He also thinks of Fred, and the boy who had been hanged, and all the other people he watched die. He thinks that he'll always carry the dead with him. Despite the joy of liberation, Yanek knows that there is also a great deal of sadness in the room.

Yanek has endured unthinkable trauma over the past six years, and he reflects on the intervening events here. He also sees how being able to grow up and survive comes with a burden: he must carry on the memories of those he lost, particularly those like Fred who were not able to grow up as Yanek is now able to do.

A few days later, Yanek is walking through Munich, still amazed that he can walk freely, when he spots Mrs. Immerglick. The woman bursts into tears, saying how good it is to see him. Yanek reminds her that the last time they saw each other, she yelled at him for bouncing a ball in the hall. Mrs. Immerglick laughs and says that she wishes she could go back to that moment and start again. She tells him that her son survived, but no one else. She also tells Yanek that his cousin, Youzek, is alive and in Munich. Yanek is amazed to learn that he still has family alive.

As Gratz describes the reunion between Yanek and Mrs. Immerglick, it is clear how important connecting to others is now that they're free. After feeling isolated and anonymous for so long, the survivors are desperate to regain anything that reminds them of the life they had prior to this traumatic war.

Yanek immediately goes to Youzek's address, where Youzek welcomes him through tears. They exchange stories: Youzek and his wife, Hela, had survived by hiding with friends. They lived in an apartment with another family named the Gamzers who had survived the same way. Yanek meets the Gamzers: Isaac, Barbara, and a 12-year-old girl named Luncia. Isaac asks what Yanek plans to do now, and Yanek explains that he likes movies and that he might try to get a job as a projectionist.

Yanek is incredibly grateful to learn that he still has family, proving again how important it is to find connections with others after feeling isolated and unsupported for so long. In exploring Yanek's path following the war, Gratz also highlights how Yanek is able to regain meaning, as he is able to rediscover and pursue his interests and passions as he moves on with his life.

Youzek suggests that Yanek should go to America to build a new life, explaining that there is a program for Jewish orphans to immigrate to America. Yanek starts to grow excited about the idea, remembering the old American movies he loved. He registers for the program and fills out forms, changing his name to Jacob Gruener. He calls himself Jack, like the American soldiers called him. The process takes years, during which time Isaac and Barbara become like second parents to Yanek.

The fact that Yanek changes his name to Jack in applying for immigration to the United States is a symbolic gesture in addition to a practical one: it demonstrates how he is choosing and creating a new identity for himself after losing so much and being robbed of his individuality for so long. In creating that new identity, he hopes to find meaning in a new life in America.

Yanek's papers finally come through in March of 1948. Though he is sad to leave Youzek, Hela, and the Gamzers, he is determined to go. He arrives at the train station, which will take him to a ship to the United States. It is almost a decade since the Nazis had rolled into Kraków. Yanek had lost his mother and father, uncles, aunts, and other cousins. He thinks that he'll always miss and remember them, but that there is nothing left in Europe for him now. He steps on board the train. He thinks that he's spent the past nine years doing everything possible to survive—now, he can begin living.

The conclusion of Yanek's story establishes once more how much Yanek has grown over the course of the war and since. At 19 years old, he is moving to an entirely new country to make a new life for himself—though he also emphasizes that he will always remember those who could not be a part of that new life. Additionally, Gratz reiterates how Yanek has kept his determination following the war: he took desperate measures to survive for so long, and now he will carry that determination into creating a new, meaningful life for himself.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Emanuel, Lizzy. "*Prisoner B-3087*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 May 2020. Web. 26 May 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Emanuel, Lizzy. "*Prisoner B-3087*." LitCharts LLC, May 8, 2020. Retrieved May 26, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/prisoner-b-3087.

To cite any of the quotes from *Prisoner B-3087* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Gratz, Alan. Prisoner B-3087. Scholastic. 2013.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gratz, Alan. Prisoner B-3087. New York: Scholastic. 2013.