

Viktor Frankl: Creativity in a Concentration Camp¹¹

Earlier, I mentioned art. Is there such a thing in a concentration camp? It rather depends on what one chooses to call art. A kind of cabaret was improvised from time to time. A hut was cleared temporarily, a few wooden benches were pushed or nailed together and a program was drawn up. In the evening those who had fairly good positions in camp—the Capos and the workers who did not have to leave camp on distant marches—assembled there. They came to have a few laughs or perhaps to cry a little; anyway, to forget. There were songs, poems, jokes, some with underlying satire regarding the camp. All were meant to help us forget, and they did help. The gatherings were so effective that a few ordinary prisoners went to see the cabaret in spite of their fatigue even though they missed their daily portion of food by going. During the half-hour lunch interval when soup (which the contractors paid for and for which they did not spend much, was labeled out at our work site, we were allowed to assemble in an unfinished engine room. On entering, everyone got a ladleful of the watery soup. While we sipped it greedily, a prisoner climbed onto a tub and sang Italian arias. We enjoyed the songs, and he was guaranteed a double helping of soup, straight “from the bottom”—that meant with peas!

To discover that there was any semblance of art in a concentration camp must be surprise enough for an outsider, but he may be even more astonished to hear that one could find a sense of humor there as well; of course, only the faint trace of one, and then only for a few seconds or minutes. Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. I practically trained a friend of mine who worked next to me on the building site to develop a sense of humor. I suggested to him that we would promise each other to invent at least one amusing story daily, about some incident that could happen one day after our liberation. [...]

Sometimes the other men invented amusing dreams about the future, such as forecasting that during a future dinner engagement they might forget themselves when the soup was served and beg the hostess to ladle it “from the bottom.” The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living. Yet it is possible to practice the art of living even in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

How was human creativity manifested in the concentration camp?

What was the function of art and humor in a concentration camp? Why did prisoners practice it?

¹¹ Viktor E. Frankl: A Man’s Search for Meaning, 1946.