

## READING

## A Basic Feeling of Human Dignity (Adapted)

Hanna Lévy-Hass was a Yugoslavian teacher imprisoned in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. She was held in a part of the camp for “exchange prisoners”—prisoners that the Nazis thought they might be able to exchange for Germans held prisoner by other countries. The exchange prisoners included many children.

Lévy-Hass wrote in her diary about both the loss of human dignity she and others suffered and how they sought to restore it.

November 8, 1944

I would love to feel something pleasant, aesthetic, to awaken nobler, tender feelings, dignified emotions. It's hard. I press my imagination, but nothing comes. Our existence has something cruel, beastly about it. Everything human is reduced to zero. Bonds of friendship remain in place only by force of habit, but intolerance is generally the victor. Memories of beauty are erased; the artistic joys of the past are inconceivable in our current state. The brain is as if paralyzed, the spirit violated.

. . . We have not died, but we are dead. They've managed to kill in us not only our right to life in the present and for many of us, to be sure, the right to a future life . . .

I turn things over in my mind, I want to . . . and I remember absolutely nothing. It's as though it wasn't me. Everything is expunged from my mind. During the first few weeks, we were still somewhat connected to our past lives internally; we still had a taste for dreams, for memories . . .

November 18, 1944

In spite of everything, my work with the children continues. . . . I cling desperately to every chance, however slight, to gather the children together to foster in them and in me even the slightest mental sharpness, as well as a basic feeling of human dignity.

It was decided in the camp that Saturdays will be devoted to children's entertainment, mostly of a religious nature. In our barracks, we are also taking advantage of Saturdays to provide the children with some amusement, but adapted mostly to the overall mentality of the people here: oral recitations, singing solo or in chorus, small theatrical productions.

Given the total lack of books, I collect and write down the material for these performances based on the children's memories and my own and more often than not, we must resort to improvising texts or poetic lines. A whole throng of known tunes have been recovered thanks to the tireless efforts and concentration of all my students—but the words escape us as if they had been sucked into a pit. So we begin to invent lines, to rhyme, to create texts that affect us deeply, to invoke our distant homeland, glorious and heroic . . .

I carry out this task spontaneously, even instinctively I would say, through an irresistible need in my soul—in the rare moments when I manage to awaken it—and by an irresistible need that I can clearly sense coming from the children's souls. Because they take my lead, they get excited, they want to live, they want to rejoice, it's stronger than them. What heartbreak!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna Lévy-Hass and Amira Hass, *Diary of Bergen-Belsen*, trans. Sophie Hand (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2009), 85–88. Reproduced by permission of Haymarket Books.

## Connection Questions

1. What conditions are necessary for someone to be able to feel a “basic feeling of human dignity”? How did Germans deprive those imprisoned in the camps of this dignity?
2. What is most striking to you about Lévy-Hass’s November 8, 1944, diary entry? What did she mean when she wrote, “We have not died, but we are dead”?
3. What role does memory play in your sense of dignity? What role does it play in your sense of identity? How are identity and dignity related?
4. To what are Saturdays devoted in the camp, according to Lévy-Hass’s November 18, 1944, diary entry? How do those activities seek to build or restore a sense of human dignity for some of those imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen? Are the Saturday activities acts of resistance? Why or why not?