SUMMARY

Primo Levi is a young Jewish-Italian man who has recently completed a degree in chemistry and has joined the Resistance Movement. While hiding out in the woods with some of his compatriots (who aren't very skilled at this whole Resistance thing), Primo is captured. Along with the others, he's taken to a holding camp in Italy before being shipped with the other captured Jews to Auschwitz, the infamous concentration and extermination camp in Poland.

For over a year, Primo is subjected to suffering we can't even begin to imagine but that was just life as usual in Auschwitz. He and his fellow prisoners are starved, beaten, and worked to the point of deathly exhaustion, all while tens of thousands of Jewish prisoners are sent to their death in the gas chambers of the nearby extermination camp, Birkenau. He forms many fleeting acquaintanceships (the average lifespan in the camp is one month) but few real friendships. Self-interest, not compassion, is more useful in surviving the harsh conditions of the camp. He struggles to maintain a sense of humanity in the face of degrading conditions designed to turn him into a non-person.

Just before the Soviet forces arrive, the Nazis evacuate the camp, taking all the healthy people on a forced march to another location, hoping to obliterate any traces of their crimes. Left behind with the ill prisoners, Primo survives. His challenge is how to learn to feel like a human being, after living in a system whose purpose was to reduce him and the other prisoners to feeling and behaving like desperate animals.