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Stories of survival through occupational eyes.

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Introduction: Tiny hand made artifacts from World War II concentration camps prompted questions about the importance of everyday activities in the camps. Did creative occupation help people survive? Fine (1991) proposed that data from narratives of camp survivors can inform occupational therapy practice.

Objectives: This study examined stories of life before, during and after surviving extreme camp conditions. An occupational focus sought insights to contribute to the knowledge base of occupational therapists today who practise alongside people facing what are to them extreme situations.

Methods: Three survivors were interviewed using a qualitative approach which invited each to tell their story from an everyday perspective. Transcribed data was subjected to repeated reading, analysis and sifting for themes. Cross referencing lists were made of described activities within the camps and activities that became part of re-created life after liberation.

Results: Three key aspects were identified: stories of occupational loss, the concept of survival occupations and the phase of transition and occupational re-creation. The survivors described the shift from happy childhood times to the barren camp environment, with the loss of nearly everything that gave their lives meaning, including their identity as human beings. None reported making artifacts as had been observed, but occupations enabling them to survive could be seen as creative. Following liberation addressing basic health issues preceded the search for significant people and places and finally finding and forging new relationships, creating new homes and occupations.

Conclusion: The study showed that even in the most hostile of environments the quintessential occupational nature of people can be observed.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: Understanding the survivor's experience of loss, survival occupations, transition and re-creation at the extreme end of a continuum of experience can help occupational therapists in more routine situations to perceptively assist people through rehabilitation, or the transition back into their familiar lives. Even the person undergoing an acute short term hospital stay has a focus on their own survival and therapists need to understand that the mastering of basic activities of daily living can assume greater importance and meaning.