

CHAPTER 1

LA “ZONA GRIGIA”

THE PARADOX OF JUDGMENT IN PRIMO LEVI’S “GREY ZONE”



Having measured up the meanders of the *gray zone* and pushed to explore the darkest side of Auschwitz, not only for judging but mainly for understanding the true nature of humans and their limits, is one of the most inestimable contributions made by Levi to any future moral philosophy.

—Massimo Giuliani, *Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi’s Thinking*

Considerable attention has been paid by a number of scholars to Levi’s controversial notion of the “grey zone.” The concept proved fundamental to his understanding of his Auschwitz experiences and has since been appropriated, often uncritically, in the fields of Holocaust studies, philosophy, law, history, theology, feminism, popular culture, and human rights issues relating to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.¹ In spite of this, there has been no attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the influences on the concept and its evolution, and little has been written on Levi’s moral judgments of “privileged” Jews. Recent interpretations and appropriations of the grey zone often misunderstand, expand upon, or intentionally depart from Levi’s ideas. This chapter returns to Levi’s original concept in order to investigate how he judges

the “privileged” Jews he portrays, namely *Kapos*, *Sonderkommandos*, and Chaim Rumkowski of the Lodz Ghetto. The analysis reveals that even Levi himself could not abstain from judging those he argues should not be judged. Paradoxically, it would seem, the conceptualization of the grey zone warns against judgment but at the same time requires it.

Influences on Levi’s Judgment: The Evolution of the Grey Zone

Primo Levi was born in Turin, on 31 July 1919, into a highly assimilated Italian-Jewish family. A prolific reader who excelled in school, Levi had a withdrawn and self-effacing nature, which remained with him throughout his life. He obtained his degree in chemistry in July 1941 despite the increasing anti-Jewish measures introduced by Mussolini’s government, with this persecution contributing to his belated sense of Jewish identity.² Joining an untrained and ill-equipped group of partisans in late 1943, Levi was soon captured and, after revealing his Jewish background, sent to the Fossoli concentration camp.³ He was then deported to Auschwitz, where he was incarcerated from 22 February 1944 to 27 January 1945. Levi was selected for work at the Buna/Monowitz subcamp (Auschwitz III), several kilometers from the gas chambers of Birkenau. Exposed to harsh and degrading conditions, he endured manual labor for many months before obtaining a specialist position in a chemical laboratory. Levi survived the Lager due only to a combination of this “privileged” position, perseverance, outside aid, and luck. On his return to Italy, Levi told his story obsessively to all around him, compiling two memoirs. He worked as a chemical analyst and manager at SIVA, a paint factory, for many years and then devoted his retirement to writing and talking, participating in hundreds of interviews and visits to schools, and compiling a multitude of stories, essays, and poems.⁴ Amidst frequent bouts of acute depression and other health and family problems, Levi continued to write and talk about the Holocaust until 11 April 1987, when he took his own life.

Publishing his essay on the grey zone less than a year before his suicide, Levi addressed a subject that had troubled him since his liberation. During an interview in 1979, shortly before he began writing *The Drowned and the Saved*, he gave a clear indication of the impetus to return to the Lager:

I feel in my stomach, in my guts, something that I haven’t quite digested, connected to the theme of the *Lager* seen again from thirty-five years’ distance. After all the polemic about the identification between victim and oppressor,

the theme of guilt, the extreme ambiguity of that place, the grey band that separated the oppressed from the oppressors [*sic*].⁵

From Levi's initial memoirs of his wartime experiences through to his last essays in *The Drowned and the Saved*, all of his writings, whether concerning chemistry, science fiction, or the Holocaust, are preoccupied with the complex nature of humanity. The question of what constitutes a "man" was the central enigma that concerned Levi even before his incarceration in Auschwitz. It was the camp, perhaps, that allowed him to reach some tentative answers, although his ideas were not always consistent, and to the end of his life he would fluctuate between optimism in humanity's potential and despair at its fallibility.

Lawrence L. Langer argues that Auschwitz had completely "sabotaged the ethical vision that [Levi] cherished as a human being."⁶ Nonetheless, Levi was unable or unwilling to abandon his humanist foundations completely. While some commentators have credited Levi with establishing a new ethical system,⁷ others contend he was never able to escape the ethical abyss left in the Holocaust's wake.⁸ Stanislaw Pugliese sees in Levi's testimony not just an effort to "bear witness," but also "to search for an ethical line of conduct and moral reasoning based on classical humanism but cognizant of humanity's changed moral status after Auschwitz."⁹ Similarly, Bryan Cheyette succinctly outlines the "ethical uncertainty" at the heart of Levi's Holocaust writings. Emphasizing "the division between Levi's renowned scientific detachment and his profound uncertainties about the efficacy of any intellectual or moral system," along with his "tremendous distrust of words," Cheyette qualifies the common impression of Levi as the dispassionate observer to show him caught between the necessity and impossibility of representation.¹⁰ Cheyette stresses Levi's "agony" at contemplating the vulnerability of Holocaust representations to succumbing so easily to stereotypes, with this agony including his own fear of betraying his and others' experiences.¹¹ In an interview in 1975, Levi explicitly demonstrated his awareness that "a human being is a 'unique,' complicated object" and that "when that object is reduced to a page, even by the best writers, it's reduced to a skeleton."¹²

The problems of judgment and (mis)representation were major dilemmas for Levi in many more of his writings than just "The Grey Zone." Ian Thomson's biography points to Levi's almost obsessive preoccupation with this theme from the time of his liberation from Auschwitz:

It is not true that Levi turned to unprecedentedly bleak themes in *The Drowned and the Saved* or, as some romantic critics like to believe, that a wave of shame and pessimism had washed over him. Bianca Guidetti Serra [a

longtime friend] first heard the words "grey zone" from Levi in 1946. "Right from the beginning," she told me in 1992, "there was always this problem of understanding what had happened and why men had behaved in the way they did. *The Drowned and the Saved* could just as easily have been Primo's first book as his last book."¹³

After choosing a career in science over literature, Levi always insisted he had never seriously considered writing before Auschwitz, although he did engage in sporadic creative writing throughout his youth, some of which shows a strong interest in the (not always virtuous) nature of human beings. According to another of Levi's biographers, "Uomo" ("Man"), an unpublished piece written during the war, tells the story of a man searching within himself in an attempt to understand his nature, only to find darkness and incomprehensibility.¹⁴ While Levi's experience in Auschwitz was the watershed event that triggered his interest in what would evolve into the grey zone, the concept arose from numerous personal, social, and cultural influences. Mapping out the development of Levi's ideas on judgment, representation, and the grey zone over time reveals that Levi's reflections on the issue of "privileged" Jews grew out of much more than a mere retrospective contemplation of his eleven months in the Lager.

A number of commentators have discussed at length Levi's deeply ingrained humanist sensibilities,¹⁵ yet his wartime experiences fundamentally challenged his strong belief in human dignity, rationality, and responsibility. Levi found himself in close proximity to moral compromise even before his arrival in the Lager. Vanda Maestro, a Jewish inmate he fell in love with at Fossoli, spent the night with the camp's Italian commandant in an unsuccessful attempt to save herself from deportation.¹⁶ Arturo Foà, a 67-year-old Jewish poet who had fanatically praised Fascist ideology, was also deported in the same cattle car as Levi. Foà's fellow occupants undoubtedly felt he had betrayed them, and he did not survive the journey, although the reasons for his demise remain uncertain. Foà's relatives believe other prisoners on the train beat him to death. Levi never wrote about these episodes, and when he was asked about Foà, he either denied the alleged murder had occurred or he broke down in tears.¹⁷ Describing the journey to Auschwitz in his memoir, Levi writes: "Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that there remain no memory."¹⁸ This obscure line reveals a tension between memory and forgetting, representation and silence, the impulse to judge and its inappropriateness. Levi would return to these dilemmas in his later work.

The corrupting influence of Auschwitz on human beings arguably disturbed Levi most and would eventually be depicted with greatest clarity

in "The Grey Zone." As noted earlier, Levi himself survived partly due to the "privileges" he obtained from his position in the Buna chemical laboratory during the last few months of his imprisonment. Although this position did not involve the kind of "moral compromise" that he would write about in *The Drowned and the Saved*, he nonetheless dwelt much on the subject of survivor guilt.¹⁹ Levi does not hesitate to admit to his "condition of privilege" as a chemical specialist and to having "deeply assimilated the principal rule of the place, which made it mandatory that you should first of all take care of yourself."²⁰ Levi expressed much shame over this, particularly in the later years of his life, even though he knew such shame was unjustified.

Eager to observe and understand the world around him, Levi took mental notes of everything he could, preserving detailed memories of the minutiae of camp life that would form the backbone of his memoirs. He commented more than once that Auschwitz had been for him a kind of university.²¹ At the beginning of *If This Is a Man*, he writes that his memoir "has not been written in order to formulate new accusations; it should be able, rather, to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind."²² Levi's astuteness and determination to analyze rather than evoke hatred or pity, aided by his training as a chemist, evolved into a scientific and philosophical quest to explain—both to himself and the world—the phenomenon of the Lager. "The Drowned and the Saved," the central chapter and working title of Levi's first memoir, reveals his preoccupation with the issue of victim behavior in the camps. Levi provides case studies of four "privileged" individuals: Schepschel, who steals to survive and betrays an accomplice in order to gain "privilege"; Alfred L., who cleans the eating pots of Polish workers for extra rations and has no pity for any fellow prisoners who cross his path; Elias, an "insane dwarf" and deceitful functionary who "insolently and violently" supervises other inmates; and lastly, Henri, who survives by stealing, cultivating the pity of others, and maintaining a cold indifference toward those around him. Rachel Falconer notes the "veiled judgment" in Levi's method of "'gradating' the 'crimes' committed in Auschwitz" in this chapter,²³ which is not unlike the moral spectrum he delineates in the concept of the grey zone, to be discussed further.

Levi writes that "Henri," an alias for Holocaust survivor Paul Steinberg, was sometimes pleasant to talk to and seemed capable of affection. However, Levi's negative judgment is evident in his portrayal of Henri as "intent on his hunt and his struggle; hard and distant, enclosed in armour, the enemy of all, inhumanly cunning and incomprehensible like the Serpent in Genesis. . . . I know that Henri is living today. I would give much to know his life as a free man, but I do not want to see him

again."²⁴ While Levi wrote in an afterword of his deliberate use of "the calm, sober language of the witness" in order to avoid explicit judgments of his persecutors (much less his fellow victims), it is clear that elements of his representation of "privileged" Jews, not least of all his biblical allusion in the above passage, position them as blameworthy.²⁵

As it happened, Steinberg published his own (aptly titled) memoir, *Speak You Also: A Survivor's Reckoning*, in 1996. The precariousness of the act of passing judgment that Levi engaged in is evident when taking into account Steinberg's traumatized narrative of his own desperate efforts to stay alive through various "privileged" means. A guilt-ridden Steinberg twice interrupts his story with chapters he calls "Digressions" in order to address Levi's portrayal of him. He notes that he was only eighteen at the time (four years younger than Levi had claimed) and represents himself as "helplessly kicked around by events."²⁶ Yet Steinberg fluctuates from self-justification to despair at his own behavior, mournfully conceding that

[Levi] must have been right. I probably was that creature obsessed with staying alive. ... Now I feel a sharp sense of regret. Primo Levi is gone, and I'd never realized what he thought of me. ... Maybe I could have persuaded him to change his verdict by showing that there were extenuating circumstances. ... Can one be so guilty for having survived?²⁷

The fact that Steinberg at times *agrees* with Levi's characterization of him complicates matters for the reader even further. Even Levi's long-time friend Hermann Langbein challenged his negative generalizations about political prisoners.²⁸ *If This Is a Man* contains numerous other portraits of morally "compromised" characters, ranging from the cruelly indifferent to the savagely violent. Levi's subsequent writings provide many more similar portraits, although his judgments tended to shift over time.

Despite feeling he had regained his "humanity" after his return to Italy, developments in Levi's personal and professional life continued to impact strongly on the evolution of his thoughts about the grey zone. In 1978, while holding a frustrating managerial position at SIVA, he came under investigation for allegedly involuntarily endangering his workers' lives following several workplace accidents.²⁹ He subsequently alluded to Auschwitz when discussing factory life on several occasions.³⁰ Indeed, Thomson writes that Levi had found himself in "a difficult situation: the more orders he gave at SIVA, the more he felt uncomfortably like an Auschwitz *Kapo*."³¹ Recent biographies also place much emphasis on the personal anxieties, frequent depressions, and occasional thoughts of suicide that plagued Levi throughout his life.³² His depres-

sions became particularly acute in the 1970s, and in 1975 he began to see a psychiatrist.

In September of 1975, Levi proposed to his publisher that he translate *The Night of the Gironde*, a semi-fictional novel written by the Dutch-Jewish historian Jacques Presser. The novel constructs a story of a young Dutch Jew who survives in the holding camp of Westerbork by loading fellow Jews onto trains headed for Auschwitz. Granted permission for this foray into the shadowy world of "privilege," Levi completed the translation only after considerable mental anguish. He states in his foreword to the translation that he had read the book repeatedly and was unable to relinquish its hold on his mind. Levi goes on to write what would be repeated in almost identical words a decade later in his essay on the grey zone:

It is naive, absurd and historically inaccurate to maintain that an evil system like Nazism sanctifies its victims: quite the reverse, it leaves them soiled and degraded, it assimilates them, and all the more so to the degree that the victims are at their disposal, virginally innocent of any political or moral constructs.³³

Here, Levi's preoccupation with the behavior of Jewish victims is clear. His early engagement with the problem of how this behavior might be judged can also be seen in his statement that "a typical feature of criminal systems like Nazism is that they debilitate and cloud our judgment."³⁴ At the same time, Levi's use of descriptors such as "soiled" and "degraded" in the passage above reveals that judgment has already been passed.

Levi's involvement in the late 1970s in a documentary being filmed about Dr. Eduard Wirths, a controversial SS physician in Auschwitz, served to reignite his interest in corruption, "collaboration," and, plausibly, the grey zone.³⁵ In 1983, Levi's heaviest depression since the 1960s coincided with his traumatic translation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, a novel that explores the disparity between legality and morality, and the subsequent problems of judgment.³⁶ Levi began to see connections between Kafka's dark tale of state-induced self-destruction and his own work, commenting in an interview that the Lager's "distortion of the world," where degradation corrupts persecutor and victim alike, is "Kafkaesque."³⁷ Likewise, Langbein's reflection on "those who got blood on their hands while wearing the striped garb of the inmates" in his study *People in Auschwitz* also anticipates the kind of problems Levi's grey zone evokes.³⁸ Another text seldom cited as important to Levi's ideas on the grey zone is Ella Lingens-Reiner's memoir, *Prisoners of Fear*, which Levi quotes in *The Drowned and the Saved*.³⁹ A German

political prisoner deported for helping Jews, Lingens-Reiner served as a doctor in the Women's Camp at Birkenau for twenty-six months. In her 1947 memoir, Lingens-Reiner argues, like Levi, that prisoners survived not by behaving with "exemplary correctness," but by "break[ing] every rule governing civilian life."⁴⁰ Indeed, at the beginning of her reflections, Lingens-Reiner contends:

It is the final condemnation of a system when it proves to be destructive and evil under the most detached and dispassionate examination, taking all the mixed human and social motives into account and transmitting the halftones as well as the black or white of the extremes.⁴¹

Other literary influences that bear direct connections to Levi's development of the "grey zone" are Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* and Dante's *Inferno*, to which I will return.⁴²

The decline of Levi's mother into senility and the indignities of old age, the death of several close friends, and Levi's own failing physical health were major causes of his depressive episodes during the final years of his life.⁴³ Throughout all of this Levi was struggling with *The Drowned and the Saved*, which was laboriously written, often no more than one page per day, between the years 1980 and 1986.⁴⁴ On 11 January 1987, only three months before his death, Levi published a review in *La Stampa* of one of his favorite childhood books, Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*.⁴⁵ The story follows Buck, a dog deported into slavery, who becomes the leader of his team by killing his vicious predecessor. In describing the transformation of Buck's "dignity" through his adjustment to his harsh environment, Levi explicitly identifies a similarity between the protagonist's situation and that of "privileged" prisoners in the Lager. He writes that Buck "has killed the leader of the team, he is the new team leader. He will be a chief (a *Kapo*?) even more efficient than Spitz, better at keeping order."⁴⁶ Many commentators have connected Levi's suicide to his experiences in Auschwitz, his conceptualization of the grey zone, and his apparent despair at the fallibility of humankind.⁴⁷ While such a controversial connection need not be made here,⁴⁸ it is evident that the grey zone remained with Levi until the end.

Levi's reasons for writing his last book were many, yet perhaps the most important factor to influence the development of "The Grey Zone" was the failings he perceived in others' memories, reception, and representations of the Holocaust. In 1987, Levi noted in retrospect that he had acted on "an immense need to put things in order, to put order back into a world of chaos, to explain to myself and others."⁴⁹ In his preface to *The Drowned and the Saved* he wrote of his intention "to contribute to the clarification of some aspects of the Lager phenomenon which still

appear obscure.”⁵⁰ The words “know” and “understand” permeate the collection, as does a concern over the failure of individual and collective memory to grasp the unprecedented horror of the Holocaust. Levi felt that this problem of reception was particularly evident in young people, and by 1983 his frustrations led him to cease visiting schools.⁵¹ Even Levi’s own children evaded his past.⁵² Another factor that strengthened his need to acknowledge the “grey zone” of ambiguity and “compromise” was a growing anxiety about the misleading influence of stereotypes. This was undoubtedly triggered in part by Levi’s strong and public opposition to the controversial military activities of Israel, for which the twin images of the “heroic” and universally victimized Jew had been appropriated.⁵³

In a passage Levi wrote in his 1975 foreword to *The Night of the Girondists*, which he repeated almost verbatim in “The Grey Zone” (quoted in the introduction), he states:

There are enough signs to indicate that the time has come to explore the space that divides the victims from their executioners, and to go about it with considerably more delicacy and clearheadedness than has been evident, for instance, in certain well-known recent films. It would take a Manichean to argue that such a space is empty. Empty it is not: it is studded with sordid, deplorable or pathetic creatures (occasionally the three at once).⁵⁴

This not only anticipates Levi’s negative attitude toward the “sordid, deplorable or pathetic creatures” of the grey zone, but also highlights his suspicion of the trivializing effects of popular representations, particularly in the medium of film. By the time he wrote his pivotal essay, a decade of cinema and the production of many more popular representations of the Holocaust had not changed his mind. He condemned the Italian director Liliani Cavani’s 1974 psychosexual film, *The Night Porter*, which portrays a tormented postwar sexual relationship between a former Nazi officer and an inmate he had raped in the camp. In “The Grey Zone,” Levi argues that Cavani’s simplistic rhetoric, which claims that all people are victims and murderers and accept these roles voluntarily, is—like her film—“false.”⁵⁵

Levi was also skeptical of the preoccupation with the Holocaust in the United States. In several articles written about the influential NBC television miniseries *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* (1978), Levi accuses the production of being fundamentally flawed in terms of its historical substance and generic conventions.⁵⁶ In a letter to a friend Levi acknowledged the benefits of the mass dissemination of the miniseries, but wrote that “it is, however, sad to think that in order to reach the man on the street [*sic*], history has to be simplified and digested

to such an extent."⁵⁷ In 1985, Levi had even more reason to question Hollywood's integrity when he was informed that his resistance novel *If Not Now, When?* was unlikely to be made into a film. Bernard Gordon, a friend who had initially found Levi a Hollywood agent, wrote to him that any work that "attempts seriously to deal with the human condition is immediately suspect in these precincts."⁵⁸ The representation of "privileged" Jews in film, a medium Levi looked on with considerable suspicion, will be examined in later chapters. First, Levi's own representation of the grey zone—and the "privileged" Jews within it—must be analyzed.

The Multifaceted Concept of the Grey Zone

Upon close examination, the "grey zone" defies a clear-cut definition, as Levi's writings on the subject elicit many theoretical tensions, shifting meanings, and contradictions. To illustrate the complexity of Levi's concept, Erna Paris paraphrases Christopher Browning's characterization of the grey zone as "that foggy universe of mixed motives, conflicting emotions, personal priorities, reluctant choices, opportunism and accommodation, all wedded, when convenient, to self-deception and denial."⁵⁹ At times, Levi restricts his grey zone to the "privileged" Jews focused on in this book, while at other times he seems to incorporate all prisoners and persecutors within "ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants."⁶⁰ Furthermore, Levi and many others argue that the grey zone and the associated problems of judgment and representation apply not only to the camps, but to the ghettos as well, and perhaps further.⁶¹ There is also a constant tension in Levi's writings between the grey zone as a metaphorical concept and the grey zone as a physical space with specific biopolitical origins. While in the most abstract sense the grey zone signifies the "grey" nature of all human behavior, the concept simultaneously refers to the sociological product of the unprecedented persecution that was the Holocaust. In this way, the concept reflects the much broader debate over the universality and "uniqueness" of the event.⁶² Additionally, the grey zone exhibits a tension between being an indecipherable realm and a moral spectrum, which gives rise to a paradox of judgment—a paradox that has significant implications for Levi's representation of "privileged" Jews.⁶³

In his essay on the grey zone, Levi is concerned with human behavior that resists a simplistic, black-and-white classification of "good" or "evil." In a similar manner to Tzvetan Todorov's more recent reflections on the camps, Levi's writing portrays the victims as neither

"heroes" nor "saints," and their persecutors as neither "monsters" nor "beasts."⁶⁴ In Levi's mind, both perpetrators and victims were capable of selfless and selfish acts. From this perspective, the grey zone can be seen as a metaphor for the ambiguities of human nature in general. As Levi said in an interview in 1983, "There are good people and less good people, each of us is a mixture of good and not so good."⁶⁵ Black-and-white Manichean stereotypes only mislead when human beings are overwhelmingly "grey." On various occasions, Levi utilized other linguistic variants, such as "grey band," "grey conscience," and "grey man."⁶⁶ And throughout "The Grey Zone" Levi makes various comments regarding human nature, not least of all through his use of a pivotal quotation regarding the corrupting nature of power from Manzoni's *The Betrothed*: "Those who provoke or oppress, all those who do any wrong to others, are guilty not only of the harm they do, but also of the twists they cause in the minds of those they have injured."⁶⁷ While Levi's primary focus is "privileged" Jews, at times his discussion of "the fundamental theme of human ambiguity fatally provoked by oppression" takes on a much broader dimension.⁶⁸ In a similar vein to Manzoni, Levi frequently shifts from observations of individual cases of ambiguous behavior to universal generalizations on human nature. Indeed, Levi writes that the figures of the grey zone are "indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us."⁶⁹ In this sense, the grey zone is, in Omer Bartov's words, "a rumination on the condition of humanity itself."⁷⁰

On the other hand, the grey zone possesses an important spatial element, with the word "zone" connoting a physical area that is cut off from its surroundings. From a literary standpoint the camp is intrinsically linked in Levi's writings to the color grey. Throughout *If This Is a Man* he makes numerous connections between greyness and various aspects of the Auschwitz environment, including bread, clouds, fog, snow, sky, dawn, and, most frequently, the inmates themselves: "Everything is grey around us, and we are grey."⁷¹ These references continue in *The Truce*, with the Lager described as "a grey and turbid nothing."⁷² However, while the grey zone is strongly attached to certain physical settings, its ultimate focus is on moral compromise in extreme situations. Indeed, it was both the unprecedented circumstances *and* environments—the Holocaust's historical specificity—that forced prisoners into what Levi calls the "grey zone." As explained in the introduction, Jews obtained "privileged" positions through dehumanizing experiences in specific settings, namely the Nazi concentration camps and the ghettos of Eastern Europe. At times Levi also appears to situate prisoners other than the

"privileged" within the grey zone, as if all victims might be seen as having in some way committed morally ambiguous acts—large or small, frequently or infrequently—in order to prolong their lives. Even in his first memoir, Levi argued that "survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world" was practically impossible.⁷³

In his essay on the grey zone, Levi stresses the impact of extreme coercion on the behavior of all prisoners in Auschwitz. He gives a detailed account of the "entry ritual, and the moral collapse which it promoted," which led to a Hobbesian-like environment permeated by a "desperate hidden and continuous struggle."⁷⁴ Yet this is counterbalanced by his assertions that many individuals, including many of the "privileged" prisoners he discusses, were *predisposed* to morally ambiguous behavior, persecution notwithstanding. Following this line of thinking, Levi reverts to the universal, claiming that "it is likely that a certain degree of man's domination over man [*sic*] is inscribed in our genetic patrimony as gregarious animals."⁷⁵ In a clear example of the tension between prisoners being coerced and predisposed to act "immorally," Levi writes that the majority of those who held positions of power in the Lager were "human specimens that range[d] from the mediocre to the execrable."⁷⁶ This ever-present tension between the particular and the universal, between extreme coercion leading to moral compromise and a preexisting human inclination to it, is an unresolved—and unacknowledged—aspect of Levi's grey zone. Another tension in Levi's writing that reveals judgment underpinning his analysis is the simultaneous characterization of the "grey zone" as indecipherable realm and moral spectrum.

In light of Levi's warning against judging "privileged" Jews, the grey zone seems to take on the characteristic of an indecipherable realm of ambiguity in which preexisting moral frameworks do not apply. Early in his essay, Levi writes: "The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limits."⁷⁷ Indeed, even in his first memoir, Levi reflected on the value of acknowledging one's lack of a "moral system" in the incomprehensible camp environment.⁷⁸ At other times, however, the grey zone gives the impression of involving a spectrum of (im)morality that requires close and careful deliberation, along which inmates and persecutors alike can be situated. His analysis of a brief moment of reluctance on the part of SS *Oberscharführer* Eric Mühsfeldt, who was assigned to supervise the killing process at Birkenau, concludes that he, too, must be placed, "though at its extreme boundary, within the grey band."⁷⁹ Further evidence of Levi's formulation of a scale of judgment is visible when he writes that the grey zone is made up of prisoners who "collaborate[d] to a varying

extent with the Lager authorities."⁸⁰ In short, while the grey zone as an indecipherable realm entails specific, unprecedented conditions in relation to "privileged" Jews and appears to undermine any moral judgment of them, it is equally clear that Levi's grey zone incorporates a moral spectrum that implies the culpability of one's behavior.⁸¹

Significantly, Levi alluded to the idea of a moral spectrum as early as 1947, in *If This Is a Man*. Binary oppositions such as "the good and the bad" are far less distinct than is generally supposed, he wrote, and human behavior allows for "numerous and complex intermediary gradations."⁸² Seldom did individuals inhabit the far extremes, he claimed; "saints" or "sadists" were, for Levi, an exiguous minority. Amassed toward one end of the moral spectrum are the victims, including those who "compromised" themselves in minor ways, while the perpetrators in their darker shades are positioned toward the opposite edge. In Massimo Giuliani's words, Levi uses the grey zone concept to describe "the area between the lowest level of victims and the highest level of Nazi executioners."⁸³ Levi's characterization of "privileged" Jews demonstrates that he places them somewhere in the middle of these extremes. Briefly moving beyond the camps and reflecting on the broad reach of the "grey zone," he writes at one point that "within this area must be catalogued, *with different nuances of quality and weight*, Quisling in Norway, the Vichy government in France, the Judenrat in Warsaw, the Saló Republic in Italy, right down to the Ukrainian and Baltic mercenaries employed elsewhere for the filthiest tasks ... and the *Sonderkommandos*."⁸⁴ Here Levi implies that the *Judenräte* and *Sonderkommandos* may be compared to and contrasted with collaborators for whom the level of coercion was of an entirely different kind, if coercion existed at all (which in some cases it did not). Indeed, the fact that the collaborationist Vichy regime in France's unoccupied zone, for example, was motivated by entrenched anti-Semitism disqualifies any comparison with the forced cooperation of the Jewish leaders and crematorium workers.⁸⁵ Paradoxically, Levi is caught between the need to suspend judgment and the simultaneous inescapability of doing so.

The paradox of judgment is also revealed in Levi's use of a metaphor that underpins all of his Holocaust testimony. Inspired by Dante's *Inferno*, which also explores the problematic zone between good and evil, many of Levi's reflections pivot on Dante's two categories: "*I sommersi e i salvati*"—"the drowned" and "the saved." The "drowned," Levi writes, consist of the *Muselmänner*, or "Muslims," the name given by camp inmates to the barely conscious "skeletons" of the camps, those nameless, voiceless prisoners who merely *existed* on the threshold of death and invariably perished in a short period of time.⁸⁶ In contrast to the

"drowned," the "saved" are those who were able to survive by obtaining some means of "privilege." In an oft-quoted passage, Levi clearly judges these prisoners:

The "saved" of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good; the bearers of a message ... Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the "grey zones," the spies. It was not a certain rule (there were none, nor are there certain rules in human matters), but it was, nevertheless, a rule. ... The worst survived—that is, the fittest; the best all died.⁸⁷

The distinction between "saved" and "drowned" seemingly parallels that of the survivors and the dead; however, not all "privileged" Jews survived—indeed, most did not.

In another important sense, Levi consigns the "privileged" to the ranks of the "drowned." Giuliani points out that the "drowned"/"saved" distinction has a double meaning and that the category of the "saved" is intrinsically ambiguous.⁸⁸ While all those who died in the camps were certainly "drowned," those who "collaborated," whose "dignity" was degraded in a different but no less real way from the *Muselmänner*, were also "drowned," whether or not they survived until liberation. As Levi wrote in *If This Is a Man*:

The personages in these pages are not men. Their humanity is buried, or they themselves have buried it, under an offence received or inflicted on someone else. The evil and insane SS men, the Kapos, the politicals, the criminals, the prominents, great and small ... all the grades of the mad hierarchy created by the Germans paradoxically fraternized in a uniform internal desolation.⁸⁹

According to Levi, very few prisoners were able to preserve their dignity *and* survive; the degrading effects of National Socialism were practically inescapable. Yet generalizing those who survived as being indelibly "compromised"—indeed, as the "worst" human specimens in the camp—unquestioningly attributes blame to "privileged" prisoners, whom Levi argues constituted the vast majority of survivors.⁹⁰ Levi clearly sees some parallels between Dante's nine circles of Hell and Auschwitz, and while he recognizes the intertextual irony that Jewish prisoners had committed no crime, it is significant that both Levi and Dante share notions of varying levels of culpability along which people can be judged.⁹¹

Levi's shifting opinions over time regarding the *Kapos* in the camps further reveal the paradoxical tension in his writings between the need to judge and the importance of suspending judgment. Indeed, the *Kapo* is an omnipresent figure in survivor testimonies, generalized and demonized to such an extent that the psychoanalytical memoir of Elie Cohen,

who spent sixteen months in Auschwitz, identifies the *Kapo* as "that type of man who has completely adjusted himself to the camp, which he regards as his definitive life, and which he desires nothing more than to continue. . . . The *Kapo* was cruel, and his cruelty must to my mind be explained by his identification with the SS."⁹² When revising his initial version of *If This Is a Man*, Levi toned down some of his previous descriptions of camp "prominents." "Alex," a character based on one of the *Kapos* who supervised Levi, was initially portrayed as an "ugly, violent brute, and treacherous," a harsh description that was removed from later editions. Thomson argues this alteration stemmed from Levi's fear of retribution from survivors, although perhaps a case can also be made for a growing acknowledgment by Levi of the grey zone.⁹³ To be sure, Levi's narratives contain numerous references to prisoner-functionaries who, while certainly not allies, were not necessarily repugnant. Exhibiting a desire to distinguish between various kinds of supervisors on several occasions, Levi points out that due to language barriers among prisoners of different nationalities, the reasons for a *Kapo's* beating were often ambiguous, as such a beating could be interpreted as an almost "friendly" incitement to work, a warning, a punishment, or as completely senseless.⁹⁴

Importantly, the vast majority of prisoner-functionaries whom Levi describes in his memoirs are criminals and political prisoners, not Jewish inmates. He refers to this crucial distinction in *If This Is a Man*, describing one *Kapo* as "not a *Kapo* who makes trouble, for he is not a Jew and so has no fear of losing his post."⁹⁵ Levi later notes that he is "more particularly interested in the Jewish prominents, because while the others are automatically invested with offices as they enter the camp in virtue of their natural supremacy, the Jews have to plot and struggle hard to gain them."⁹⁶ Due to their low position in the Nazis' racial hierarchy, Jewish *Kapos* held their life-prolonging "privileged" positions much more tentatively. Although Levi acknowledges this, his judgments are foreshadowed by his use of words such as "plot," "betrayal," "hateful," "cruel," and "tyrannical." To these descriptors he adds the controversial thesis that a Jewish prisoner-functionary's "capacity for hatred, unfulfilled in the direction of the oppressors, will double back, beyond all reason, on the oppressed; and he [*sic*] will only be satisfied when he has unloaded on to his underlings the injury received from above."⁹⁷ In contrast to this negative judgment, some years later, in *The Truce*, Levi constructed a relatively sympathetic portrayal of Henek, the fifteen-year-old *Kapo* of the children's block who personally performed the "selections" for the gas chambers among his subordinates. Describing Henek as a "good companion" who "enjoyed splendid physical and spiri-

tual health," Levi blandly recounts Henek's insistence that he felt no remorse for performing the "selections" as he could not have survived any other way.⁹⁸ Restraint is also shown in Levi's short story "The Juggler," which narrates an incident when "Eddy," a criminal prisoner and *Kapo*, discovered Levi writing a letter in Auschwitz and dismissed him with a warning rather than a severe punishment.⁹⁹

While Levi had fluctuated in his judgment of the *Kapos*, by the time "The Grey Zone" was written, he clearly saw them as to some extent blameworthy and positioned them along the moral spectrum. Levi writes in his essay that "few survivors feel guilty about having deliberately damaged, robbed, or beaten a companion: those who did so (the *Kapos*, but not only they) block out the memory."¹⁰⁰ This, of course, implies that they *should* feel guilty. Indeed, although Levi distinguishes Jewish from non-Jewish *Kapos* as he had before, at no point does he explicitly suggest the former should be exempt from judgment, as he does for the *Sonderkommandos* and Rumkowski. He makes certain blanket statements about all "privileged" prisoners, such as his declaration that "before such human cases it is imprudent to hasten to issue a moral judgment ... the concurrent guilt on the part of the individual big and small collaborators (never likeable, never transparent!) is always difficult to evaluate."¹⁰¹ Yet Levi's bracketed personal opinion again reveals the paradoxical bind he finds himself in. Even in emphasizing the inappropriateness of hasty judgment, he slides into a discourse implying the blameworthiness and distastefulness of his subjects. Shortly afterward, Levi notes that "if I were forced to judge, I would lightheartedly absolve all those whose concurrence in the guilt was minimal and for whom coercion was of the highest degree,"¹⁰² listing a "picturesque fauna" of positions that does not include that of a *Kapo*. Again, in suggesting that neither he nor anyone else should cast judgment, Levi communicates his moral evaluation nonetheless.

Levi again evokes the notion of a moral spectrum when he writes that "judgement becomes *more delicate and varied* for those who occupied commanding positions."¹⁰³ He finds the *Kapos* to be a case in point, then reveals his own judgment both when he mentions the possibility of resistance by "privileged" prisoners and when he asserts that *Kapos* were individuals predisposed to certain behavior: "Power of such magnitude overwhelmingly attracted the human type who is greedy for power."¹⁰⁴ Negative judgment is further evident in the list of "infinite nuances and motivations" that Levi claims influenced the actions of *Kapos*: "terror, ideological seduction, servile imitation of the victor, myopic desire for any power whatsoever, even though ridiculously circumscribed in space and time, cowardice, and finally lucid calculation aimed at eluding the

imposed orders and order."¹⁰⁵ Most of the motives Levi identifies as the driving forces behind *Kapo* behavior suggest more about the internal nature or personality of the individual and their supposed freedom of choice than the more obvious factor, that of the extreme coercion *Kapos*—and particularly Jewish *Kapos*—were confronted with. In describing at length the “atrocities” committed by *Kapos* on fellow inmates, Levi does not mask his judgment, stating that “the power of these small satraps was absolute.”¹⁰⁶

The paradoxical bind Levi finds himself in is evident toward the end of this section of “The Grey Zone”:

It remains true that in the Lager and outside, there exist grey, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise. The extreme pressure of the Lager tends to increase their ranks; they are the rightful owners of a quota of guilt (which grows apace with their freedom of choice), and besides this they are the vectors and instruments of the system’s guilt. ... In reality, in the enormous majority of cases, their behavior was rigidly preordained.¹⁰⁷

This passage reveals the unresolved tensions in Levi’s writing between the particular and the universal; the human predisposition to “compromise” and the unprecedented pressures determining action; and between the moral spectrum where blame increases with free will and the indecipherable realm of the Lager that “rigidly preordained” one’s behavior, thus ruling out moral responsibility. In the end, the need to avoid hasty judgment of those who were nonetheless “rightful owners of a quota of guilt” places both writer and reader in a situation where judgment is impossible, but yet inevitable. While Levi concedes that survival until liberation ultimately came down to chance,¹⁰⁸ it is clear that he does judge the *Kapos* and other “privileged” Jews, even those he explicitly argues should not be judged.

Representing Those Beyond Judgment

As late as 1979, Levi had not yet committed himself to his call to suspend judgment, stating in an interview that the oppressed “were more or less forced into compromises, sometimes very grave compromises, which it is very hard indeed to judge. ... But they should be judged, and above all we should be aware of them and not ignorant.”¹⁰⁹ By the time *The Drowned and the Saved* was complete, however, Levi seems to have reached the conclusion that one should not pass judgment on “privileged” Jews. Merging the generic boundaries of a survivor’s account with philosophical reflection, “The Grey Zone” sees Levi tentatively

take upon himself the task of testifying to the experiences and behavior of these liminal figures. Importantly, survivor testimony, which has inspired a considerable critical literature, is a genre made up of texts that exhibit a wide range of devices, strategies, and intertextual meanings, with survivor narratives constructed through the use of such devices as chronology, description, characterization, dialogue, metaphor, and narrative perspective.¹¹⁰ An analysis of the literary techniques Levi employs reveals that he is unable to fulfill his own requirement of avoiding judgment when representing the extreme situations of "privileged" Jews. His reflections on the Jewish crematorium workers who made up the *Sonderkommandos*, for whom Levi wrote judgment should be suspended, exemplify this.

Levi's "Crematorium Ravens"

Levi describes the conception and organization of the *Sonderkommandos* as "National Socialism's most demonic crime."¹¹¹ He details at length the horrific duties the *Sonderkommandos* performed under the threat—or better, *reality*—of imminent death, qualifying his description of the material benefits their work afforded them with the statement, "Here one hesitates to speak of privilege."¹¹² However, when Levi begins to describe the few acts of resistance by the "special squads," he constructs a binary opposition underpinned by judgment. Levi notes the exception of a group of four hundred Jews from Corfu who refused to undertake the gruesome work and were then subsequently killed. Additionally, he praises the twelfth *Sonderkommando* in Birkenau, which undertook an armed revolt in October 1944, destroying one crematorium in the process.¹¹³ Levi had previously mentioned the Birkenau uprising twice in his writings but made little comment on the daily activities of the *Sonderkommandos*. He characterizes the *Sonderkommando* resisters in *If This Is a Man* as "helpless and exhausted slaves like ourselves, [who] had found in themselves the strength to act, to mature the fruits of their hatred."¹¹⁴ In "Resistance in the Camps," an article published in 1966, Levi describes the *Sonderkommando* revolt as "the most important episode of active rebellion against Nazi power in the extermination camps," praising its "desperate boldness."¹¹⁵

Levi uses similar language in his essay on the grey zone; however, here he draws a clear distinction, contrasting the *Sonderkommando* resisters with "the miserable manual labourers of the slaughter ... the others, those who from one shift to the next preferred a few more weeks of life (what a life!) to immediate death."¹¹⁶ While Levi immediately follows this by reiterating, "I believe that no one is authorised to judge

them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not live through it,"¹¹⁷ the implicit judgment in Levi's characterization of these "others" is evident. The binary opposition between "resistance" and "cooperation" on the part of different *Sonderkommando* members is further revealed in a comment Levi made in an interview in 1983, when he pondered whether he would have resisted rather than become one of these "others":

My first reaction is to say that there is no possibility of resilience in the face of such violence. I ask myself what I would have done if it had happened to me, whether I would have had the courage to kill myself, to let myself be killed if I had been offered the task? Perhaps they didn't understand at first what they were being asked to do. There are some cases of people who preferred to let themselves be killed rather than join the *Sonderkommando*, but there are many who didn't.¹¹⁸

While Levi cannot definitively answer the question he asks of himself, his judgment is nevertheless evident when he notes that to prefer immediate death required "courage," which he appears to consider more virtuous than continuing with the work.

Levi's somewhat negative judgment of the crematorium workers is revealed in various ways throughout his essay, such as when he inaccurately suggests they were "in a permanent state of complete debasement and prostration" due to the alcohol to which they had access.¹¹⁹ While drinking was used as a coping mechanism in the *Sonderkommandos*, the prisoners had to be both physically and mentally capable of enduring the grueling work, which often lasted twelve hours or longer at a time. Levi also makes an arguably disparaging claim regarding the *Sonderkommando* testimonies written amidst the inferno and buried for posterity at Birkenau. He asserts that "from men who have known such extreme destitution one cannot expect a deposition in the juridical sense of the term, but something that is at once a lament, a curse, an expiation, and an attempt to justify and rehabilitate themselves."¹²⁰ While the memoirs and manuscripts of the *Sonderkommandos* do sometimes contain elements of self-justification, they also provide detailed statistics and descriptions of the extermination process and those involved. In any case, Levi's statement might be seen to suggest that the members of the "special squads" need to "justify and rehabilitate" themselves.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of Levi's judgment of the *Sonderkommandos* is his literary allusion to the *monatti* of Manzoni's canonical Italian work, *The Betrothed*. A constant intertextual element throughout Levi's writings, Manzoni's historical novel depicts the city of Milan ravaged by plague in the mid-seventeenth century. The figures of the

monatti are based on the men who removed corpses from the houses and streets to mass graves, transported the sick to the *lazaretto* (containment area), and burned or fumigated any potentially infected matter. Manzoni's characterization of the *monatti* is overwhelmingly negative. He writes:

The only men who generally took on the work of the *monatti* ... were those more attracted by rapine and licence than terrified of contagion or susceptible to natural feelings of revulsion. ... They entered houses as masters, as enemies, and (not to mention their thieving or treatment of the wretched creatures reduced by plague to passing through their hands) they would lay those foul and infected hands on healthy people, on children, parents, wives, or husbands, threatening to drag them off to the *lazaretto* unless they ransomed themselves or got others to ransom them with money. ... [They] let infected clothes drop from their carts on purpose, in order to propagate and foster the plague, for it had become a livelihood, a reign, a festival for them.¹²¹

Later in the novel some of these "depraved creatures" are described as drinking alcohol while sitting on a pile of corpses, with one exclaiming, "Long live the plague, and death to the rabble!"¹²² While the historical parallel with the *Sonderkommandos* may in some ways seem apt, Levi's intertextual reference also draws on Manzoni's judgment.

At one point, Manzoni describes a "filthy *monatto*" as briefly showing "a kind of unusual respect and involuntary hesitation" when faced with the body of a young girl killed by the plague.¹²³ It is here that Levi makes a connection to a unique incident in Birkenau, when a young girl survived the gas chamber and was temporarily cared for by the *Sonderkommando* members who found her. Levi describes these Jews, "debased by alcohol and the daily slaughter," as "transformed" by the survivor's presence, although she was discovered and executed soon after.¹²⁴ The parallel Levi makes between Manzoni's *monatti* and the *Sonderkommandos* seems to involve more than a brief moment of pity, particularly when considering Levi's concluding comment that "compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment."¹²⁵ Employing a rhetorical shift from the particular to the universal, Levi seems to suggest that the crematorium workers were in some way predisposed to undertake the work they did. In the words of the poet Michael O'Siadhail, in Levi's representation, the *Sonderkommandos* had "fallen beyond his compassion's greyest zone."¹²⁶ While Levi, albeit unsuccessfully, stresses that the *Sonderkommandos* should not be subject to moral evaluation, he argues that "the same *impotentia judicandi* paralyses us when confronted by the Rumkowski case."¹²⁷

Judging Chaim Rumkowski

Levi concludes his essay on the "grey zone" with a detailed discussion of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877–1944), an elderly, failed Jewish industrialist who served as the president of the Lodz Ghetto from October 1939 to August 1944.¹²⁸ Due to being located in Poland's most important manufacturing region, the financial and material value of the Lodz Ghetto to the Nazis helped ensure that it was the longest surviving of all the ghettos, although its peak population of approximately 160,000 was continuously whittled away by starvation, disease, and deportations. The constant vulnerability of Jews in the Lodz Ghetto is indicated by the Nazis' "firm promise" to the city administration in mid-1940, just as the ghetto was sealed off, that Jews would be "completely removed" from it by early October of that year.¹²⁹ By maintaining the required levels of production, the Jewish community's officials believed that even as the extermination of Jews was well under way (although the time when this became clear to Jewish leaders is difficult to evaluate), at least a remnant could be saved. This seems to be the theory that Rumkowski based his actions on, and he was not unique among *Judenrat* leaders in thinking this. Appointed *Älteste der Juden* ("Elder of the Jews") in late 1939,



Figure 1.1. Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Jewish Council in the Lodz Ghetto, and other officials pose for a group portrait underneath a banner and a large portrait of Rumkowski (#25335). *Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives*

the fact that all other members of the Jewish Council were executed and replaced soon after, and that he himself later died in Auschwitz, demonstrates the precariousness of such a "privileged" position.

Rumkowski oversaw the running of the Lodz Ghetto until its liquidation just several months before the end of the war. It has been hypothesized that without the Soviet army's controversial decision to delay its advance into Poland by halting at the Vistula River, little more than 100 kilometers from Lodz, up to 80,000 Jews may have been saved and Rumkowski may have been memorialized as a savior rather than a traitor.¹³⁰ It is undeniable that Rumkowski himself suffered persecution at the hands of the Nazis. We know that he was physically beaten and that his phones were tapped.¹³¹ Nonetheless, for various reasons, Rumkowski has become the most despised "privileged" Jew in all survivor testimony concerning the Lodz Ghetto. Such is the controversy surrounding Rumkowski that Lucille Eichengreen's memoir, *Rumkowski and the Orphans of Lodz*, is structured around her scathing critique of the Jewish leader.¹³² A frequent point of reference in representations of Rumkowski is his so-called "Give me your children!" speech of 4 September 1942, in which he reportedly explained the need to "sacrifice" those less likely to survive in order to save the ghetto's remaining population.¹³³ In a recent memoir, Abraham Biderman describes Rumkowski as a "medieval despot" who "play[ed] poker with the devil."¹³⁴ Even Jacob Robinson, who vigorously defended the *Judenrat* officials against Hannah Arendt's polemics, contends that "Rumkowski's behaviour is open to criticism."¹³⁵ While Levi's negative judgment of Rumkowski is usually (though not always) more subtle than this, his evaluation of the Jewish leader is evident throughout "The Grey Zone."

Levi's interest in Rumkowski was piqued long before he wrote *The Drowned and the Saved*. Indeed, the analysis he provides in his last book is almost identical to his earlier attempt to come to grips with the Jewish leader's behavior described in Levi's "Story of a Coin," which began as a newspaper article and was eventually published in 1981 in *Moments of Reprieve*.¹³⁶ The fact that Levi had previously written only about "privileged" Jews in settings and situations he had witnessed or experienced directly is indicative of his personal compulsion to explore the case studies of Rumkowski and the *Sonderkommandos*. While Levi does not seem prepared, at least consciously, to condemn Rumkowski, he does write that Rumkowski's apparent "natural" will to power "does not exonerate him from his responsibilities":

If he had survived his own tragedy, and the tragedy of the ghetto which he contaminated, superimposing on it his histrionic image, no tribunal would

have absolved him, nor certainly can we absolve him on the moral plane. But there are extenuating circumstances: an infernal order such as National Socialism was, exercises a frightful power of corruption, against which it is difficult to guard oneself. ... To resist it a truly solid moral armature is needed, and the one available to Chaim Rumkowski ... together with his entire generation, was fragile.¹³⁷

In this passage Levi seems to suggest that Rumkowski is legally and morally guilty (since the absolution that he suggests is inappropriate implies guilt). On the other hand, he also points to the inefficacy of legal institutions and moral faculties in judging "privileged" Jews. Levi's argument that Rumkowski cannot be judged due to "extenuating circumstances" is therefore contradicted by his suggestion that the Jewish leader had "contaminated" the ghetto, a statement which distracts one from the extreme coercion that he and other Jewish council members were subjected to. Having already mentioned the production of ghetto currency, stamps, and songs that Rumkowski had dedicated to himself, Levi reinforces his judgment that the Jewish leader forced "his histrionic image" on the ghetto's inhabitants.¹³⁸

While conceding that Rumkowski's position was "intrinsically frightful," Levi also writes that "the four years of his [Rumkowski's] presidency or more exactly, his dictatorship, were an astonishing tangle of megalomaniacal dream, barbaric vitality, and real diplomatic and organizational ability."¹³⁹ While Levi portrays Rumkowski as demonstrating a genuine concern for many of his subordinates at times, he also characterizes him as possessing an arrogant sense of self-importance that proved detrimental to many of the ghetto's Jews. His representation of the much reviled Jewish leader is replete with negative descriptors such as "authoritarian," "renegade," and "accomplice."¹⁴⁰ Levi also links Rumkowski with the moral standards (or lack thereof) that he perceives in the *Kapos*, describing him as a "corrupt satrap" who displays the "identification with the oppressor" condemned earlier in his essay.¹⁴¹ Indeed, Levi becomes more explicit toward the end of "The Grey Zone," not only drawing a parallel between Rumkowski and "the *Kapos* and Lager functionaries," but also with "the small hierarchs who serve a regime to whose misdeeds they are willingly blind; of the subordinates who sign everything because a signature costs little; of those who shake their heads but acquiesce; those who say, 'If I did not do it, someone else worse than I would.'"¹⁴² By generalizing Rumkowski's "complicity" in this way and making reference to the postwar excuse common among captured Holocaust perpetrators, Levi arguably verges on blurring the distinction between victim and persecutor, a distinction he had gone to great lengths to emphasize several pages earlier.



Figure 1.2. Rumkowski leaves the site of a public demonstration in the Lodz Ghetto after delivering a speech to calm the people's fear and anger about food provisioning in the ghetto. Also pictured are Leon Rozenblat (walking with Rumkowski) and Shmuel Eizmann (the Jewish leader's bodyguard, behind Rumkowski, to the right) (#63024). *Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives*

Confidently claiming that Rumkowski “passionately loved authority,” Levi positions him as a self-proclaimed “King of the Jews” who “rode through the streets of his minuscule kingdom, streets crowded with beggars and postulants.”¹⁴³ This reflects the fact that Levi was influenced by Leslie Epstein’s controversial 1979 novel, *King of the Jews*, which was also initially to be the title of Levi’s “Story of a Coin.”¹⁴⁴ By turns scandalous, compassionate, and perverse, the protagonist of Epstein’s fictionalized narrative develops an almost mythological aspect, fluctuating between dedicated representative and egotistical dictator of the ghetto. Levi’s representation also shifts between positive and negative evaluations of Rumkowski’s character, which arguably results in a more nuanced portrayal of the Jewish leader than is generally found elsewhere. Nonetheless, the precariousness of Levi’s undertaking is evident in the manner in which he frequently prefaces his critical comments about Rumkowski. When Levi writes that his subject “*must have* progressively convinced himself that he *was* a Messiah,” that “*it is probable* that Rumkowski thought of himself not as a servant but as a Lord,” and that “he *must have* taken his own authority seriously,” his representation reveals certain assumptions underpinning his judgment, despite the extremely

complex circumstances at issue.¹⁴⁵ In any case, Levi clearly expects that the reader will adopt his judgment.

In the same way that Levi implies the *Kapos* and crematorium workers were to some extent predisposed by nature to morally ambiguous behavior, there is a clear sense that he thinks the same of Rumkowski. After explicating the addictive and corruptive qualities of "power," Levi writes:

If the interpretation of a Rumkowski intoxicated with power is valid, it must be admitted that the intoxication occurred not because of, but rather despite, the ghetto environment; that is, it is so powerful as to prevail even under conditions that would seem to be designed to extinguish all individual will.¹⁴⁶

Significantly, this is the first time Levi explicitly prioritizes the influence of the human predisposition to "compromise"—in this case, Rumkowski's alleged lust for power—over the impact of external factors, namely the choiceless choices imposed by the Nazi regime.

Most tellingly of all, when Levi states that Rumkowski "must be placed in this band of half-consciences," he adds that "whether high or low it is difficult to say."¹⁴⁷ The imagery invoked of a "band" along which "privileged" Jews are situated at various points returns us to the paradoxical conceptualization of the grey zone as both an indecipherable realm and a moral spectrum. Reflecting on where Rumkowski should be positioned on this moral continuum, Levi alludes to the impossibility of judgment through his expression of uncertainty, his acknowledgment that "it is difficult to say." Levi's call for a suspension of judgment is also evident in his self-reflexive, rhetorical movements from the particular to the universal. The end of his essay, for example, transforms into a general digression on the corruptive influence of power. Having questioned the possibility of judging the Jewish leader, Levi states, "We are all mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours."¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Levi's judgment is again revealed in his allusion to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Just as Levi drew on Manzoni's demonized *monatti* in his judgment of the *Sonderkommandos*, he explicitly compares Rumkowski with Angelo, the devious and hypocritical villain of Shakespeare's play, who uses his position of power for personal gain and attempts to have a man executed for a crime he himself committed.¹⁴⁹

Levi's search for a universal lesson in the experiences of "privileged" Jews, who are both ostensibly beyond—but at the same time subject to—his judgment, is again highlighted in the closing lines of his essay. Shifting once more from the particular to the universal, Levi provides another self-reflexive, pessimistic extrapolation from the historically



Figure 1.3. Rumkowski in conversation with Hans Biebow, head of the *Gettoverwaltung* [German ghetto administration] (#29112). *Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives*

specific ethical dilemmas confronting "privileged" Jews to a despairing social commentary on human nature:

Like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility: willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death and that close by the train is waiting.¹⁵⁰

Raniero Spelman argues that "this may be the most pregnant of Levi's sayings and the nucleus of his philosophy. These words link the Shoah to us, just like we are already linked to the Shoah."¹⁵¹ In placing us in the position of the Jewish leader—or at the very least acknowledging the possibility that we may one day be faced with such pressures under similar circumstances—Levi makes a genuine, if ultimately unsuccessful, effort to suspend judgment of Rumkowski.

Levi's essay on the grey zone starkly reveals the limit of judgment one confronts when engaging with the unprecedented ethical dilemmas of "privileged" Jews. Returning to Levi's original ideas in relation to the grey zone, this chapter has exposed a paradox of judgment underpinning his reflections, as it would seem to be the case that even if moral judgment of "privileged" Jews is inappropriate, it is also inevitable. The product of a multitude of personal, social, and cultural influences, Levi's attitude toward the problem of judgment and the behavior of "privileged" Jews changed over time. He was strongly influenced by what he perceived to be misrepresentations of the Holocaust, particularly in history and film. Warning of "excessive simplifications," Levi nonetheless holds that the grey zone comprises "a phenomenon of fundamental importance for the historian, the psychologist and the sociologist,"¹⁵² revealing his belief that modes of representation other than survivor testimony *should* engage with the sensitive issue of "privileged" Jews.

Toward the end of "The Grey Zone," Levi raises a crucial point that cannot be easily set aside: like most "privileged" Jews, the only words about Rumkowski that we lack and can never obtain are his own. Levi writes that only Rumkowski could clarify his situation "if he could speak before us, even lying, as perhaps he always lied, to himself also; he would in any case help us understand him, as every defendant helps his judge."¹⁵³ Faced with this problem, it has been the ongoing task of the scholar to piece together the debris of the past to approach a better understanding of it. Judgment plays a crucial role in this. By explicitly and self-reflexively engaging with this complex issue, Levi invokes the need to suspend judgment when representing "privileged" Jews yet is himself compelled to judge Rumkowski. As noted in the introduction,

the behavior of Jewish leaders has been a subject of considerable controversy. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the *Jüdenräte* in the work of Raul Hilberg, to which I now turn.

Notes

1. For specific examples of the influence of the grey zone in these areas, see, respectively, Petropoulos and Roth, *Gray Zones*; Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollack (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, [1991] 1999); David Luban, "A Man Lost in the Gray Zone," *Law and History Review* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2001); Tim Cole, *Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 248–49; John K. Roth, "In Response to Hannah Holtschneider," in *Fire in the Ashes: God, Evil, and the Holocaust*, ed. David Patterson and John K. Roth (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 53–54; Claudia Card, "Groping through Gray Zones," in *On Feminist Ethics and Politics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Bryan Cheyette, "The Uncertain Certainty of *Schindler's List*," in Loshitzky, *Spielberg's Holocaust*; Seymour M. Hersh, "The Gray Zone," *The New Yorker* 80, no. 13 (24 May 2004). Levi's concept has also been applied to legal trials of former "privileged" prisoners in René Wolf, "Judgment in the Grey Zone: The Third Auschwitz (Kapo) Trial in Frankfurt 1968," *Journal of Genocide Research* 9, no. 4 (December 2007). Further appropriations of the grey zone are cited below.
2. For further discussion, see Sergio Parussa, "A Hybridism of Sounds: Primo Levi between Judaism and Literature," in Pugliese, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*.
3. Had Levi been treated as a partisan, he would have been immediately executed.
4. Most of Levi's writings have now been published in English, and full details can be found in the bibliography.
5. Levi goes on to note that these themes are already present in his earlier memoirs and short stories. See Giuseppe Grassano, "A Conversation with Primo Levi (1979)," in Belpoliti and Gordon, *The Voice of Memory*, 131.
6. Lawrence L. Langer, "Legacy in Gray," in Kremer, *Memory and Mastery*, 198.
7. See, for example, Gordon, *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues*; Massimo Giuliani, *Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking* (Lanham: Lexington, 2003).
8. See Adam Katz, "On 'Maelstroms Large and Small, Metaphorical and Actual': 'Gray Zones' in the Writings of Primo Levi," *Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (1 July 1999).
9. Stanislaw G. Pugliese, "Trauma/Transgression/Testimony," in Pugliese, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, 10.
10. Bryan Cheyette, "The Ethical Uncertainty of Primo Levi," in *Modernity, Culture and "the Jew"*, ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 271.
11. *Ibid.*, 272.
12. Quoted in "Germaine Greer Talks to Primo Levi (1985)," in Belpoliti and Gordon, *The Voice of Memory*, 6.
13. Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 470. Similarly, Carol Angier writes in her psycho-biography: "Already now, in Auschwitz itself and on his return, [Levi] began his research into the 'grey zone' of human behaviour, the compromise with evil. And already now he saw that it was inescapable: that in extremity many compromise entirely, and almost all to some extent." Angier, *The Double Bond*, 346.
14. See Angier, *The Double Bond*, 215–18.

15. See, for example, Fred Misurella, "A Clear Eye on Life: Renaissance Style in Primo Levi's Writing," in Pugliese, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*.
16. Angier, *The Double Bond*, 281. Maestro, whom Levi had known at university and as a fellow partisan, was the secret addressee of Levi's love poem, "25 February 1944." See Primo Levi, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, [1984] 1988), 7.
17. Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 163; Angier, *The Double Bond*, 286–87.
18. Levi, *If This Is a Man*; and, *The Truce*, 22.
19. See the essay entitled "Shame" in Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 52–67.
20. *Ibid.*, 113, 59.
21. See, for example, Anna Bravo and Federico Cereja, "The Duty of Memory (1983)," in Belpoliti and Gordon, *The Voice of Memory*, 234.
22. Levi, *If This Is a Man*; and, *The Truce*, 15.
23. Rachel Falconer, "Selfhood in Descent: Primo Levi's *The Search for Roots* and *If This Is a Man*," in Vice, *Representing the Holocaust*, 215. Curiously, Falconer maintains that Levi refuses to judge "Henri."
24. Levi, *If This Is a Man*; and, *The Truce*, 106.
25. *Ibid.*, 382.
26. Paul Steinberg, *Speak You Also: A Survivor's Reckoning*, trans. Linda Coverdale and Bill Ford (New York: Henry Holt and Company, [1996] 2000), 105.
27. *Ibid.*, 130–31. Significantly, Steinberg also offers a considerably different perspective on Levi's demonized dwarf "Elias." See *ibid.*, 46, 51–52, 119. For an in-depth discussion of both memoirs, see Susanna Egan, "The Drowned and the Saved: Primo Levi and Paul Steinberg in Dialogue," *History and Memory* 13, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2001).
28. Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 147–48, 159, 169–70.
29. Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 302, 304, 325, 338, 364–66.
30. During an interview in 1979, Levi addressed some unionists' characterizations of the workplace as consisting of "assembly-line slaves and evil bosses" by stating that "there is a whole band in between those extremes where work is neither punitive nor alienating." See Silvia Giacomini, "The Wrench (1979)," in Belpoliti and Gordon, *The Voice of Memory*, 95. See also Mirna Cicioni's connection of Levi's fictional short story entitled "Our Fine Specifications" to "The Grey Zone" in Cicioni, *Primo Levi*, 64.
31. Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 339.
32. In addition to the books by Angier and Thomson, see Anissimov, *Primo Levi*, 388–406.
33. Primo Levi, "Foreword" to Jacques Presser, *The Night of the Girondists*, trans. Barrows Mussey (London: Harvill, [1957] 1992), ix–x.
34. *Ibid.*, x.
35. See Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 369. Levi also wrote a preface to Rudolf Höss, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, trans. Andrew Pollinger, 2nd ed. (New York: De Capo, [1985] 1996).
36. Franz Kafka, *Il processo* [The trial], trans. Primo Levi (Turin: Einaudi, [1925] 1983).
37. Federico DeMelis, "An Assault Called Franz Kafka (1983)," in Belpoliti and Gordon, *The Voice of Memory*, 159.
38. See Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 519–20. Indeed, Levi describes with admiration Langbein's aim "not to accuse or to move, but to facilitate understanding." See Primo Levi, *The Search for Roots: A Personal Anthology*, trans. Peter Forbes (London: Allen Lane, [1981] 2001), 207.
39. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 59.
40. Lingens-Reiner, *Prisoners of Fear*, 22.
41. *Ibid.*, ix.

42. For a detailed discussion of the influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" on Levi's grey zone, see Insana, *Arduous Tasks*, 56–92.
43. For further discussion, see Angier, *The Double Bond*, 602, 630–31.
44. *Ibid.*, 605–6.
45. Jack London, *The Call of the Wild* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, [1903] 1915), 81–82.
46. Primo Levi, "Jack London's Buck," in *The Critical Response to Jack London*, ed. Susan M. Nuernberg (Westport: Greenwood, [1987] 1995), 81–82. For another connection to London's book, see Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 49.
47. For the most (in)famous example of this thesis, see Cynthia Ozick, "Primo Levi's Suicide Notes," *New Republic* 198, no. 12 (21 March 1988). See also Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Primo Levi: The Survivor as Victim," in *Perspectives on the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Raul Hilberg*, ed. James S. Pacy and Alan P. Wertheimer (Boulder: Westview, 1995).
48. Indeed, there are good reasons for avoiding the assumption that Auschwitz eventually "claimed" Levi. For further discussion, see Alexander Stille, "The Biographical Fallacy," in Pugliese, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*; Jonathan Druker, "On the Dangers of Reading Suicide into the Works of Primo Levi," in Pugliese, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*.
49. Quoted in Roberto DiCaro, "The Essential and the Superfluous (1987)," in Belpoliti and Gordon, *The Voice of Memory*, 174.
50. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 9.
51. Bravo and Cereja, "The Duty of Memory (1983)," 230. Levi writes of one disillusioning encounter with a child unable to understand the nature of the Lager in his chapter, "Stereotypes." See Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 127–28.
52. See Angier, *The Double Bond*, 477–78.
53. See Giampaolo Pansa, "Primo Levi: Begin Should Go (1982)," in Belpoliti and Gordon, *The Voice of Memory*; and Gad Lerner, "If This Is a State (1984)," in Belpoliti and Gordon, *The Voice of Memory*.
54. Levi, "Foreword" to Presser, *The Night of the Girondists*, x.
55. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 32.
56. See, for example, Primo Levi, *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, trans. Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 56–66.
57. Quoted in Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 376–77.
58. Quoted in *ibid.*, 445.
59. Erna Paris, *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), 313.
60. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 27.
61. Along with mentioning various collaborating governments, such as those of Norway, Vichy France, and Italy, Levi situates SS *Oberscharführer* Mühsfeldt within the grey zone. See Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 27–28, 40–41. Furthermore, Levi makes it clear that the grey zone is also evident in the Soviet Gulag. See *ibid.*, 25, 27, 31. Other scholars apply the grey zone to bystanders, resister-collaborators, or groups and individuals in situations unrelated to the Holocaust. See Joram War-mund, "The Gray Zone Expanded," in Pugliese, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*; Doris L. Bergen, "Mourning, Mass Death, and the Gray Zone: The Ethnic Germans of Eastern Europe and the Second World War," in *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End*, ed. Peter Homans (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Pamela Ballinger, "Who Defines and Remembers Genocide After the Cold War?: Contested Memories of Partisan Massacres in Venezia Giulia in 1943–1945," *Journal of Genocide Research* 2, no. 1 (2000); Dariusz Stola, "Jedwabne: Revisiting the Evidence and Nature of the Crime," *Holocaust and Genocide Stud-*

- ies 17, no. 1 (Spring 2003); Beth Griech-Polelle, "Image of a Churchman-Resister: Bishop von Galen, the Euthanasia Project and the Sermons of Summer 1941," *Journal of Contemporary History* 36, no. 1 (January 2001); Stefano Levi Della Torre, "The Limit and the Unlimited," in Bemporad, Pawlikowski and Sievers, *Good and Evil After Auschwitz*; Eric D. Weitz, "Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 27; Victoria Sanford, "The 'Grey Zone' of Justice: NGOs and Rule of Law in Postwar Guatemala," *Journal of Human Rights* 2, no. 3 (September 2003); Lynne Viola, "The Grey Zone," *The Nation* 277, no. 11 (13 October 2003). Viola makes no explicit reference to Levi and uses the concept to discuss the morally ambiguous behavior of bystanders in Soviet Russia. For further feminist interpretations of the grey zone that discuss patriarchal repression and violence, see Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Lynne S. Arnault, "Cruelty, Horror, and the Will to Redemption," *Hypatia* 18, no. 2 (2003). For another, less developed, application of the grey zone, in this case to psychiatric care, see Mary V. Seeman, "Therapy in the Grey Zone: Psychiatry Recalled," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 171, no. 12 (7 December 2004).
62. For more on this issue, see Norman Geras, "In a Class of Its Own?," in *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust*, eds. Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Essays in Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 17–32; part 1 of John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications* (New York: Paragon House, 1989); Nathan Rotenstreich, "The Holocaust as a Unique Historical Event," *Patterns of Prejudice* 22, no. 1 (1988).
 63. These ideas were first developed in Adam Brown, "The Trauma of 'Choiceless Choices': The Paradox of Judgment in Primo Levi's 'Grey Zone,'" in *Trauma, Historicity, Philosophy*, ed. Matthew Sharpe, Murray Noonan and Jason Freddi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007).
 64. Todorov's work is heavily influenced by the rejection of ethical Manicheanisms in Levi's writings. See Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 262.
 65. Bravo and Cereja, "The Duty of Memory (1983)," 232.
 66. Levi uses the "grey band" and "grey, ambiguous persons" in his essay "The Grey Zone." See Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 33, 40. Levi refers to "a vast zone of grey consciences" in his earlier discussion of Chaim Rumkowski. See Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. Ruth Feldman (London: Abacus, [1981] 1990), 171. The phrase "grey man" is taken from Risa Sodi's interview with Levi, during which he spoke of Austrian collaborator Kurt Waldheim as "*uomo grigia*" (grey man), which Sodi translates as "grey zoner." See Risa Sodi, "An Interview with Primo Levi," *Partisan Review* 54, no. 3 (1987): 365.
 67. Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, trans. David Forgacs and Matthew Reynolds (London: J. M. Dent, [1827] 1997), 31; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 29.
 68. *Ibid.*, 43.
 69. *Ibid.*, 26.
 70. Omer Bartov, "Introduction," in Bartov, *The Holocaust*, 11.
 71. Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 77.
 72. *Ibid.*, 379.
 73. *Ibid.*, 75.
 74. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 23–25.
 75. *Ibid.*, 30.
 76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, 23.
78. Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 47.
79. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 40. In contemplating the grey zone as a moral spectrum, it is especially important to remember that victims and perpetrators must still be distinguished from each other. Ilona Klein stresses this to the point of defining two "grey zones": one between the Jewish prisoners, and "another entirely different gamut of ambiguous shades of grey" between the prisoners and the Nazis. See Ilona Klein, "Primo Levi: The Drowned, the Saved, and the 'Grey Zone,'" *The Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 7 (1990): 85.
80. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 28 (my emphasis).
81. This reflects the tension in Levi's writings identified by Cicioni between "a view of the universe as hurtling meaninglessly toward its own destruction and a humanist attempt to discover and mediate meanings." See Cicioni, *Primo Levi*, 144.
82. Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 93–94.
83. Giuliani, *Centaur in Auschwitz*, 44.
84. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 27–28 (my emphasis).
85. Envisaging such a comparison being made in the early postwar years, Rudolf Kastner wrote that "it would be entirely out of place to compare the *Judenrat* with the ordinary Quislings and collaborationists, because only the Jews were haunted by the nightmare of total physical destruction: every other nation had at its disposal some means of self-preservation, self-defense, and self-assertion." Quoted in Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, 181. For one account among many of French collaboration, see Michael R. Marrus, "Coming to Terms with Vichy," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1995).
86. Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 96.
87. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 62–63.
88. Giuliani, *Centaur in Auschwitz*, 57.
89. Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 127–28.
90. Note that Levi's application of the notion of the "privileged" here is different from the way in which the term is used in this book.
91. For further discussion of Levi's relationship to Dante, see Risa Sodi, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); Nicholas Patruno, "Primo Levi, Dante, and the 'Canto of Ulysses,'" in Pugliese, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*.
92. Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp*, 200–201.
93. Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 230.
94. See Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 73; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 55; Grassano, "A Conversation with Primo Levi (1979)," 132.
95. Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 72.
96. *Ibid.*, 97.
97. *Ibid.*
98. *Ibid.*, 199.
99. Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 25–33.
100. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 59.
101. *Ibid.*, 28.
102. *Ibid.*, 29.
103. *Ibid.* (my emphasis).
104. *Ibid.*, 30–31.
105. *Ibid.*, 28.
106. *Ibid.*, 31.
107. *Ibid.*, 33.

108. *Ibid.*, 33–34.
109. Quoted in Grassano, "A Conversation with Primo Levi (1979)," 131–32.
110. For more detail on this point, see Robert Eaglestone, "Identification and the Genre of Testimony," in Vice, *Representing the Holocaust: In Honour of Bryan Burns*; Lawrence L. Langer, "Interpreting Survivor Testimony," in Lang, *Writing and the Holocaust*, 8.
111. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 37.
112. *Ibid.*, 34.
113. *Ibid.*, 41.
114. Levi, *If This Is a Man; and, The Truce*, 155.
115. Levi, *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, 20.
116. Levi also writes that "it must be remembered that it was precisely the Special Squad which in October 1944 organised the only desperate attempt at revolt in the history of the Auschwitz Lager." See Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 41–42.
117. *Ibid.*, 42.
118. Quoted in Bravo and Cereja, "The Duty of Memory (1983)," 245. Significantly, Levi proceeds to respond to the interviewer's next question by noting how rare suicides were due to the extreme dehumanization imposed by the camp setting: "There was no time to think about killing yourself." *Ibid.*, 246.
119. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 36.
120. *Ibid.*
121. Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, 454–55.
122. *Ibid.*, 487.
123. *Ibid.*
124. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 39. The account of the incident Levi draws on is taken from Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, 114–20.
125. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 39.
126. See the poem "Ravens" in Michael O'Siadhail, *The Gossamer Wall: Poems in Witness to the Holocaust* (St. Louis: Time Being, 2002), 72.
127. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 43.
128. The following analysis was first developed in Adam Brown, "Traumatic Memory and Holocaust Testimony: Passing Judgement in Representations of Chaim Rumkowski," *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique*, no. 15 (June 2008).
129. See Götz Aly, "'Jewish Resettlement': Reflections on the Political Prehistory of the Holocaust," in *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies*, ed. Ulrich Herbert (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 63–64. While the intended method of "removal" at this time was relocation rather than mass murder, the breaking of this early "promise" still highlights the longevity of the Lodz Ghetto in the face of Nazi ideological pressure.
130. Notably, Yehuda Bauer ponders the possible outcomes had this scenario occurred: "Would we have erected a statue in his memory, as a hero of the Jewish people, or would we have sentenced him to death for having knowingly caused the murder of thousands upon thousands of helpless Jewish children, old people, and sick people? The moment we raise the question, we instinctively pass judgment, even though we might say that we have no right to judge. Frankly, I would vote for the gallows, not the statue; but I realize that there are two sides to the story." Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 132. See also Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides, eds., *Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege* (New York: Penguin, [1989] 1991), 489.
131. For further details, see Lucjan Dobroszycki, ed., *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto, 1941–1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 504.
132. Lucille Eichengreen, *Rumkowski and the Orphans of Lodz* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 2000).

133. For details of Rumkowski's speech, see Josef Zelkowitz, *In Those Terrible Days: Writings from the Lodz Ghetto*, trans. Naftali Greenwood (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2002), 279–85.
134. Abraham Biderman, *The World of My Past* (Milsons Point: Vintage, 1995), 124, 83. Later in his memoir, Biderman questions the appropriateness of judging Rumkowski, concluding: "I leave it for history to judge." See *ibid.*, 186–88.
135. Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, 178.
136. Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, 161–72.
137. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 49–50.
138. Levi also notes that Rumkowski adopted the oratorical devices of Hitler and Mussolini, and demanded that schoolchildren praise him in their essays. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
139. *Ibid.*, 45.
140. *Ibid.*, 44, 46.
141. *Ibid.*, 46, 32.
142. *Ibid.*, 50.
143. *Ibid.*, 45.
144. Leslie Epstein, *King of the Jews* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1979).
145. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 46 (my emphasis).
146. *Ibid.*, 49.
147. *Ibid.*, 50.
148. *Ibid.*
149. See William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (New York: Penguin, 2000). Levi quotes Isabella's generalized reflection on the corruption of "Man" who "Dressed in a little brief authority,/ Most ignorant of what he's most assured,/ His glassy essence, like an angry ape,/ Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven/ As make the angels weep." Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 50.
150. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 51.
151. Raniero M. Speelman, "Primo Levi's Short Stories: A Modern Midrashim," in Pugliese, *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, 29.
152. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 9.
153. *Ibid.*, 50.