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**Beyond 'Good' and 'Evil':
Breaking Down Binary Oppositions in Holocaust Representations of
'Privileged' Jews**

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Abstract

In 1986, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi's paradigmatic essay entitled 'The Grey Zone' highlighted the complex and sensitive issue of so-called 'privileged' Jews, an issue that remains at the margins of popular and academic discourse on the Holocaust. 'Privileged' Jews include those prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps and ghettos who held positions that gave them access to material and other benefits whilst compelling them to act in ways which have been judged both self-serving and harmful to fellow inmates. The unprecedented ethical dilemmas that confronted 'privileged' Jews may be viewed as exemplifying the 'limit' events or experiences that were characteristic of the Holocaust, situating them at the threshold of representation, understanding and judgement. Levi's essay singles out history and film as particularly predisposed to a simplifying trend he identifies – the 'Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities,' and resorts to the black-and-white binary opposition(s) of 'friend' and 'enemy,' 'good' and 'evil.' In the case of 'privileged' Jews in particular, such binary oppositions would appear to be inadequate. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates the fields of history, philosophy and literature, this paper considers representations of 'privileged' Jews, particularly those prisoners of the *Sonderkommandos* who were forced to work in the crematoria. The paper demonstrates how easily the boundary Levi maps out for moral judgement can be crossed. It is shown that while Levi suggests judgement should be suspended when confronted with the experiences of victims *in extremis*, moral evaluations of 'privileged' Jews permeate discussions and representations of the Holocaust. When confronted with such emotionally and morally freighted issues, judgement may itself be seen as a 'limit of representation.'

On 17 October, 1962, the fragmented and partially indecipherable manuscript of Salmen Lewenthal, a Polish Jew, was unearthed at the site where the crematoria of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp once stood. Although he died before the camp's liberation, Lewenthal had included in his testimony the following passage:

We were shamed of one another and we dared not look one another in the face... [...] I admit that I, too, [...] it appeared that my actions, too, [...] were [...] ... the truth is that one wants to live at any cost, one wants to live because one lives, because the whole world lives. And all that one wishes, all with what one is, if only slightly, bound [...] is bound with life first of all, without life [...] such is the real truth.¹

Lewenthal had been a member of the *Sonderkommando* ('Special Squad') forced to work in Birkenau's gas chambers and crematoria. The tasks of these prisoners, the vast majority of them Jews, involved using deception to keep order among those about to be gassed; sorting their confiscated belongings; guiding them into the chambers; hosing down the corpses; cutting hair and extracting teeth from the bodies; burning the corpses in the furnaces or on outdoor pyres; crushing the remaining bone fragments; and disposing of the ashes, which were used as fertiliser, insulation or scattered on the Vistula River. Men were chosen for the *Sonderkommandos* upon arrival at the camp and, less commonly, as a form of punishment. In return for their cooperation, the *Sonderkommandos* had access to clothing, bedding, food, cigarettes and alcohol, all taken from newly arrived 'transports.' There were thirteen successive 'Special Squads' in the Birkenau extermination camp, as each group was routinely executed after approximately four months. Any refusal was answered with immediate death. Survival invariably came down to chance.

The members of the *Sonderkommandos* belong to the important category of so-called 'privileged' Jews. In addition to the extreme circumstances of crematorium workers such as Lewenthal, the category of 'privileged' Jews refer to the Jewish prisoners in the camps who held positions as doctors, supervisors of prisoner barracks and *Kapos* ('heads') of labour squads. Likewise, members of the *Judenräte* ('Jewish Councils') and *Ordnungsdienst* ('Order Service'), or Jewish police, in the ghettos are viewed as 'privileged.' 'Privileged' Jews therefore include those prisoners in the Nazi-controlled ghettos and camps who held positions that gave them access to material and other benefits beyond those available to other Jews.² Subject to extreme levels of coercion, these victims were compelled to act in ways that have been judged as both self-serving and harmful to fellow inmates. Indeed, 'privileged' was a common term used by other prisoners to describe these individuals. Such controversial figures constitute an intrinsically important, frequently misunderstood and hastily judged facet of the Holocaust. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi's paradigmatic essay on what

he calls the 'grey zone' is one of the few discussions that directly address this complex and sensitive subject. Levi writes that 'the prisoners who in some measure, perhaps with good intentions, collaborated with the authority, was not negligible, indeed it constituted a phenomenon of fundamental importance.'³ A key tenet of Levi's reflection on 'privileged' Jews is that they should not be judged for their ambiguous behaviour. Nonetheless, as Susan Pentlin argues in her essay, 'Holocaust Victims of Privilege,' in order to develop a deeper understanding of the Holocaust and its moral implications, one must listen to the 'voices from the grey zone,' explore the often tabooed issues of 'position and privilege.'⁴

The ethical dilemmas that 'privileged' Jews encountered have proven a very problematic subject for Holocaust survivors, scholars and artists alike as they attempt to understand and represent the experiences and behaviour of these victims. Jews in the camps and ghettos experienced unprecedented persecution, in which the normal concepts of 'choice' and 'responsibility' were radically undermined. When confronted with the traumatic circumstances of 'privileged' Jews, the practice of casting judgement becomes highly contentious. Scholars have neglected the problems of judgement and representation in relation to 'privileged' Jews; nonetheless Holocaust texts frequently portray these liminal figures. This paper will focus on representations of the extreme situations of the *Sonderkommandos*. It will be argued that while judgement of 'privileged' Jews may be impossible, it is also inevitable.⁵

The 'Special Squads' and the Problems of Judgement and Representation

Claire Colebrook points out in her general study of ethics and representation that 'representation marks a limit, a point beyond which knowledge cannot go: a recognition of the point of view of knowledge. For knowledge's very possibility lies in perspective, point of view, position and finitude.'⁶ Many scholars have regarded the Holocaust as a 'limit event,' the implications of which include what Simone Gigliotti terms its 'contested representational possibility in historical discourse, literary and visual culture, and in testimonial narratives.'⁷ Saul Friedlander, a seminal theorist on the representation of the Holocaust, writes that the event is often perceived as 'so extreme and so unusual that they are considered events at the limits, posing unique problems of interpretation and representation.'⁸ Addressing the twin necessities of maintaining the memory of the past through representation and avoiding its distortion, Friedlander argues that 'there are limits to representation *which should not be but can easily be transgressed*. What the characteristics of such a transgression are, however, is far more intractable than our definitions have so far been able to encompass.'⁹ The paradoxical notion of 'representing the unrepresentable' is a foundational idea underlying the writings of Friedlander and many others, with the problematic variously termed 'speaking the unspeakable,' 'comprehending the incomprehensible,' and so on. The problematic that is

highlighted in Levi's writing on the 'grey zone' may be fitted in here as well. The extreme situations of the *Sonderkommandos*, which seem to defy understanding, exacerbate this problem even more. Thus the ethical dilemmas confronting 'privileged' Jews may be seen to give rise to a 'limit' of judgement. If it is the case that judgements of the behaviour of 'privileged' Jews should be suspended, then it would seem that there is a need for those who represent these liminal figures to abstain from judging them. In placing 'privileged' Jews within what he calls the 'grey zone,' this is what Levi seems to recommend.

Levi's 'grey zone' is essentially a metaphor for moral ambiguity, a conceptual realm with 'ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. [The "grey zone"] possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.'¹⁰ This in itself highlights the way in which Levi's concept problematises judgement, as his characterisation of the 'grey zone' could be (and often has been) interpreted to involve a merging, if not a blurring, of the fundamental categories of persecutors and victims. However, Levi stresses elsewhere in his essay, and for good reason, that 'to confuse [perpetrators] with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth.'¹¹ The concept of the 'grey zone' proved fundamental to Levi's understanding of his Auschwitz experience 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.¹² Recent interpretations and appropriations of the 'grey zone' often misunderstand, expand upon or intentionally depart from Levi's ideas, and there has been little attention paid to Levi's own representation of those 'privileged' Jews he argues should not be judged. This paper returns to Levi's original concept in order to investigate how Levi himself judges the *Sonderkommandos* and how historians have responded to his writing. A crucial part of Levi's final book, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), the concept of the 'grey zone' raises fundamental questions regarding the treatment of liminal figures by those who represent the Holocaust. Drawing on his experiences in Auschwitz, Levi is chiefly concerned in his essay with *Kapos*, the members of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommandos* and the controversial Jewish 'Elder' Chaim Rumkowski of the Lodz Ghetto. While Levi unequivocally holds the perpetrators of the Holocaust responsible for their actions, he warns that one should avoid judging their victims. In the case of the *Sonderkommandos*, Levi declares that 'our need and ability to judge falters,' and that any moral evaluation of their behaviour must be 'suspended.'¹³

The contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben appropriates Levi's concept of the 'grey zone' in his call for a radical revision of how ethics is conceived in the wake of the Holocaust.¹⁴ While Agamben does not focus on 'privileged' Jews in his discussion of what he perceives as the disintegration of an ethics founded on human

dignity, he briefly dwells on the liminal figures of the *Sonderkommandos*. Meditating, albeit somewhat abstractly, on the 'grey zone,' Agamben notes a crucial obstacle to any attempt at understanding, namely, the problem of judgement: 'The unprecedented discovery made by Levi at Auschwitz concerns an area that is independent of every establishment of responsibility, an area in which Levi succeeded in isolating something like a new ethical element.'¹⁵ However, Agamben's blurring of persecutors and persecuted in his characterisation of the 'grey zone' as a realm in which 'victims become executioners and executioners become victims' clearly signals a departure from Levi's ideas.¹⁶ Accepting the inherent difficulties in judging 'privileged' prisoners, Dominick LaCapra reiterates that 'one may judge quite harshly and with little qualification Nazis who were instrumental in creating the situation that gave rise to the grey zone.'¹⁷ Above all, the distinction between victim and perpetrator must be maintained. Here then is the crux: how are distinctions between groups of victims – those with 'privileged' positions and those without – to be drawn without undermining the crucial separation of victims from their persecutors?

Another prominent philosopher, Hannah Arendt, has been a controversial figure in relation to the issue of 'privileged' Jews. Arendt's aggressive attitude towards the behaviour of Jewish leaders during the Holocaust has been the subject of fierce criticism.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Arendt makes a distinction between what she calls the 'limited freedom of decision and of action' in the ghettos and the utter lack of choice in the camps, which she views as inhibiting any possibility of effective resistance.¹⁹ Her major study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, stresses the unparalleled 'total domination' of the prisoners in Nazi camps, including the intentional and systematic erasure of Jews' legal status, personal identity and moral being:

When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family – how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder.²⁰

Adopting an apparently sympathetic attitude, Arendt suggests that there is 'no moral problem' with regards to Jewish behaviour in the camps due to the extreme situations that confronted them.²¹ However, Arendt appears to contradict her own argument when she accuses the Jewish *Sonderkommandos* of 'committ[ing] criminal acts' when they were employed in the 'actual killing process.'²²

The somewhat problematic writings of Agamben and Arendt reveal that Levi's effort to impress on his readers the precariousness of addressing the complex and sensitive issue of 'privileged' Jews is of crucial importance. Meditating on the unprecedented situations these liminal figures faced works towards exposing the horror and

degradation of the 'Holocaust experience' for its victims, and helps to avoid falling into stereotypes that 'simplify' or 'trivialise' the event. Significantly, Levi felt compelled to reflect on the 'grey zone' partly due to his concern about historical and filmic representations that he felt 'trivialised' the complexity of Holocaust experiences. Levi singles out history and film as particularly predisposed to the simplifying trend he identifies – the 'Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities,' and resorts to the black-and-white binary opposition(s) of 'friend' and 'enemy,' 'good' and 'evil.'²³ One way in which Levi's concept of the 'grey zone' suggests judgement should be suspended is by disposing of ethical Manicheisms and 'heroic' discourses. The extreme situations of 'privileged' Jews reveal traditional notions of 'heroism' to be highly problematic. In his literary analysis of the 'antiheroic' in Levi's writings, Victor Bromberg observes: 'Heroic models and heroic expectations are shown to be illusory and misleading. Offended by any rhetoric that might present the victim as hero, Levi is interested rather in what he calls the "gray zone" of moral contamination.'²⁴ While the need to avoid demonising perpetrators is the chief concern of Ronnie Landau's contention that 'one must seek to guard against grotesque oversimplification and debasement of Holocaust terminology and imagery,'²⁵ Levi implies that rejecting stereotypical representations of Jews as passive victims, heroic martyrs or complicit traitors is arguably just as important. Finding the language to describe the extreme situations of the Holocaust, a task with which survivors themselves invariably struggle, is immensely difficult. While the distinction between perpetrators and victims must be upheld, an abandonment of a Manichean perspective and any related 'heroic' discourse is essential to highlight the complexity of the situations that faced 'privileged' Jews. Nonetheless, avoiding black-and-white stereotypes alone does not guarantee that judgement is suspended when representing 'privileged' Jews.

By constantly invoking the need to suspend judgement, Levi's essay on the 'grey zone' implicitly calls for a nuanced representation of 'privileged' Jews. However, while at times Levi seems confident that judgement of 'privileged' Jews can be suspended, at other times his writing suggests that it is unclear whether or not suspending judgement of these figures is possible. Levi writes early in 'The Grey Zone' that: 'The condition of the offended does not exclude culpability, and this is often objectively serious, but I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgement.'²⁶ This statement seems to suggest that while 'privileged' Jews *are* blameworthy and morally responsible for their behaviour, it *might* be the case that nobody can take such a position. Yet, in order to assert that 'privileged' Jews are blameworthy but should not be judged, it is evident that Levi's judgement precedes this. While Levi is highly regarded for his sophisticated and unemotional prose, his own representation of those he argues should not be judged reveals that he himself struggles to abstain from judgement.

Representing the 'Crematorium Ravens': Levi's 'Grey Zone' and the Responses of Historians

Levi describes the conception and organisation of the *Sonderkommandos* as 'National Socialism's most demonic crime.'²⁷ He details at length the horrific duties the *Sonderkommandos* performed under imminent death, qualifying his description of the material benefits their work afforded them with the statement 'here one hesitates to speak of privilege.'²⁸ However, when Levi begins to discuss the few acts of resistance by the 'Special Squads,' he constructs a binary opposition underpinned by judgement. Levi notes the exception of a group of four hundred Jews from Corfu who refused to undertake the gruesome work, before being subsequently gassed. Additionally, he writes with praise of the 12th *Sonderkommando* in Birkenau, which undertook an armed act of resistance in October 1944, destroying one crematorium in the process.²⁹ In 'Resistance in the Camps,' an article published in 1966, he describes the uprising as 'the most important episode of active rebellion against Nazi power in the extermination camps,' praising its 'desperate boldness.'³⁰ 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.'³¹ While Levi immediately follows this by reiterating that '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,'³² the implicit judgement in Levi's characterisation of these 'others' is evident.

The binary opposition between 'resistance' and 'collaboration' on the part of different *Sonderkommando* members is further revealed in a comment he made in an interview in 1983, when Levi 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.³³

While Levi cannot definitively answer the question he asks of himself, his judgement is 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 negative judgement of the *Sonderkommandos* is also revealed when he writes that 'within [the "grey zone"] 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*.³⁴ Here, Levi implies that 'privileged' Jews may be compared to and contrasted with collaborators whose 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 was arguably motivated by strong anti-Semitism disqualifies any comparability with the forced cooperation of the crematorium workers.³⁵

Perhaps the most telling indicator of Levi's judgement of the *Sonderkommandos*, however, is his literary analogy with 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 those men who removed the 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 characterisation of the *monatti* is overwhelmingly negative: 'They entered houses as masters, as enemies... 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.'³⁶ At one point in his novel, 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.³⁷ It is here that Levi makes a connection to the unique incident in Birkenau when a young girl survived the gas 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.³⁸ 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.'³⁹ 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.'⁴⁰ It would seem that if judgement is impossible, then, paradoxically, it would also appear to be inevitable. This paradox of judgement can also be seen in responses by historians to Levi's writing on the 'grey zone.'

While Levi recoils from the 'Special Squads,' the Australian historian Inga Clendinnen takes a vastly different tone in the chapter of her book, *Reading the Holocaust*, entitled 'Inside the grey zone: The Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*.'⁴¹ Until recently, little work has been done by historians on the subject of the Jewish *Sonderkommandos*.⁴² Clendinnen is thus one of the few historians to engage directly

with Levi's ideas on 'privileged' Jews. Significantly, Clendinnen reiterates Levi's warning against judgement and goes to great lengths to emphasise the inappropriateness of moral evaluation. Claiming to 'lack any footing from which to judge' Jews in 'privileged' positions, Clendinnen proceeds to represent the *Sonderkommandos* with positive judgement.⁴³ She emphasises the allegedly easy-going, 'humane' relationships shared between members of the *Sonderkommandos* and their SS guards, characterising the former as men who laboured for long hours in an intimate and semi-harmonious environment.⁴⁴ Following this, Clendinnen comments on a documented scenario that has resulted in two conflicting interpretations and exemplifies the different judgements placed on the *Sonderkommandos* by Levi and Clendinnen. The scenario is taken from the memoir of Auschwitz survivor Miklos Nyiszli, who briefly describes an event he witnessed one night near the crematoria:

The Sonderkommando brought out a football. The teams lined up on the field. "SS versus SK." On one side of the field the crematorium's SS guards; on the other, the Sonderkommando. They put the ball into play. Sonorous laughter filled the courtyard. The spectators became excited and shouted encouragement at the players, as if this were the playing field of some peaceful town. Stupefied, I made that mental note as well. Without waiting for the end of the match, I returned to my room.⁴⁵

It is noteworthy that Nyiszli (discussed further in chapter five), who is reputed to have maintained quite civil relations with *Oberscharführer* Mühsfeldt and the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele, seems to betray some moral aversion from, or at least anxiety towards, this game. Levi's reaction to the scenario in 'The Grey Zone' is even stronger. Taking the liberty of elaborating on certain details, Levi describes the spectators at the game: 'they take sides, bet, applaud, urge the players on as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green.'⁴⁶ In stark contrast to this, Clendinnen describes the match as 'a particularly eerie example of comradely fun: an impromptu twilight football match between scratch teams from the "SS" and the "SK," with much shouting and laughter from players and onlookers alike.'⁴⁷ The differences between these two descriptions prove instructive on just how crucial the use of language can be. Levi hears 'Satanic laughter' behind the match, viewing it as symbolic of the SS consummating its corruption of the Jewish prisoners: 'You are like us, you proud people, dirtied with your own blood.'⁴⁸ On the other hand, Clendinnen interprets the situation as 'men being allowed to recognise each other, even if briefly, as human beings.'⁴⁹ While, as David Hirsch notes, 'Levi positions the members of those special squads in one of the murkiest enclaves of the gray zone,'⁵⁰ Clendinnen absolves them of any assumed wrongdoing. Both writers' interpretations of the football match are clearly underpinned by their moral judgements.

Robert Gordon notes that Levi's 'grey zone' is not a 'plea for mitigation. Its power lies precisely in its acknowledgement that there *is* guilt and innocence at work.'⁵¹ It is here that the paradox of judgement at the heart of Levi's concept again reveals itself. The crucial point, as quoted from Levi earlier, is that in the case of the *Sonderkommandos*, human beings – particularly those who did not directly experience Nazi persecution during the Holocaust, but even those who did – lack the necessary requirements, whether moral faculties or legal institutions, to judge them. But as has become clear, judgement is passed nonetheless. Most tellingly of all, the sense that Clendinnen seeks to justify the *Sonderkommandos'* actions is clear when she ends her discussion on a note of outright praise:

Ought the men of the *Sonderkommandos* be judged morally defective because, surviving long enough to become habituated to the iron circumstances of their existence, they strove to make a kind of life in the midst of the horror? My own inclination is to admire their toughness of spirit. Adaptability is a human virtue, requiring its own brand of courage.⁵²

The contradiction in Clendinnen's humanistic analysis is only too apparent in the rhetorical question which follows this passage: 'And surely it is absurd to evaluate moral performance in a setting studiously designed to deny the autonomy, indeed the moral existence, of the majority of its members?'⁵³ To write with admiration of positive 'human virtue' and courageous efforts to 'make a kind of life,' as if the members of the *Sonderkommandos* were stubborn pioneers, appears ill fitting when describing such an ambiguous existence. Indeed, Levi argues in 'The Grey Zone' that in addition to the need to suspend negative judgement, *praising* the morally ambiguous behaviour of 'privileged' Jews is also inappropriate, as 'not all their acts should be set forth as examples.'⁵⁴

The opposite tendency to Clendinnen's outright absolution can be found in Joram Warmund's essay on the 'grey zone,' in which he often seems intent on ignoring Levi's warning against judgement by positioning 'privileged' Jews in the camps as perpetrators *as well as* victims. In his effort to 'expand' Levi's 'grey zone,' Warmund, like Agamben, insists that the categories of perpetrators, victims and bystanders are not as sharply delineated as is often assumed, but are often inextricably blurred by individuals who inhabit multiple roles.⁵⁵ This is partly a result of his misreading of Levi, who, Warmund claims, 'described the Lager as an environment in which the victims turned on each other and imposed an internal hierarchy.'⁵⁶ This constitutes a significant omission of the role of the Nazis in initiating the system of persecution. It was the SS who asked for volunteers or conscripted prisoners for their use. While criticising Clendinnen's exculpation of the 'Special Squads,' Warmund makes the highly dubious comment that not all individuals in the *Sonderkommandos* were 'doing their work purely because they were under orders.'⁵⁷ It is difficult to imagine what ulterior motives he may have had in mind. In any case, it is clear that moral

judgement has been passed in both writers' responses to Levi's 'grey zone': while Clendinnen shifts the *Sonderkommandos* from 'grey' to 'white,' Warmund arguably reverses this, making the move from 'grey' to 'black.'

Conclusion: 'And What Would You Have Done?' Negotiating the Paradoxical Bind

Conventional vocabulary limps through a situation that allows no heroic response, no acceptable gesture of protest... This predatory profile of survival, when fear of such death, not affirmation of a basic human dignity, drives men and women to behavior they would not consider under normal circumstances, confirms another moment when reality defeats both a language of judgment and a mode of moral behavior.⁵⁸

The subject of 'privileged' Jews has often been considered taboo and no study has focused specifically on the place of moral judgement in representations of their experiences. In approaching the unprecedented situations of 'privileged' Jews such as Salmen Lewenthal, with whom this discussion began, even such a nuanced and sophisticated concept as the 'grey zone' cannot satisfy its own requirements of suspending judgement. In the case of the *Sonderkommandos*, it would seem impossible to completely fulfil Levi's dictum that we 'meditate on the story of "the crematorium ravens" with pity and rigour, but [let] a judgement of them be suspended.'⁵⁹ Historians who have responded to what they see as the unwarranted judgements expressed by Levi have similarly been shown to judge 'privileged' Jews. The need to imagine the unimaginable, represent the unrepresentable and judge those who should not be judged has been shown to cause many unresolved problems. The simultaneous impossibility and inevitability of judgement may be termed a paradoxical bind in which Levi and Clendinnen are entangled. Even if binary oppositions are rejected, how are we to understand the experiences of 'privileged' Jews? Perhaps one approach is to reflect on the ethical dilemmas of these liminal figures with, to use Levi's words, 'pity and rigour,' and to continuously ponder the unanswerable question of what we ourselves might have done if faced with their extreme situation. A poem by Günther Anders entitled 'What Would You Have Done?' self-consciously addresses the problem of attempting to comprehend the experiences of the *Sonderkommandos* when confronted with the 'limit' of judgement and representation, and would seem a fitting note with which to end:

Did you busily scrape the dust of friends and relatives
out of the oven?
And did you cart the wagon through the snow
to the ash heap of those who were burned?
Was the word meant for you: 'You will live as long
as the oven smokes,

For you are needed?'
Covered with such dust, did your mouth
give the report in barracks language?
That extra soup, was it for the work of your shovel?
And the double ration for the sweat you shed?
And was the word for you: 'Only late, at some unknown time,
After the coal comes the collier, too?'
Not you, not I. We remain untested.
Thus you may scrape the ovens every night,
And, in your dreams, at his side, push the wagon.
But you cannot grasp a jot of what was in the man's mind,
only that now and then he looked up, as if he were
thinking,
'And what would you have done?'⁶⁰

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- ¹ Quoted in J. Bezwinska and D. Czech (eds.), *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Prisoners in Crematorium Squads Found at Auschwitz* (New York: Howard Fertig, [1973] 1992), 136 & 139.
- ² This paper adopts a very specific definition of 'privilege' in order to concentrate on the ethical dilemmas that many victims faced, although the term has also been used at times to categorise Jews in Germany whose deportation was postponed due to prior military service, marriage to non-Jews and so on, or Jews in the ghettos who held a higher socio-economic status than others.
- ³ P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. R. Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, [1986] 1988), 9.
- ⁴ S. L. Pentlin, 'Holocaust Victims of Privilege,' in H. J. Cargas (ed.), *Problems Unique to the Holocaust*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 39 & 26.
- ⁵ 'Impossibility' here does not imply that one is literally unable to pass judgement on 'privileged' Jews – far from it, as the following discussion reveals. Instead, the 'impossibility' of judgement refers to the perceived invalidity or *inappropriateness* of any moral evaluation of 'privileged' Jews.
- ⁶ C. Colebrook, *Ethics and Representation: From Kant to Post-structuralism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 2.
- ⁷ S. Gigliotti, 'Unspeakable Pasts as Limit Events: The Holocaust, Genocide, and the Stolen Generations,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 49/ 2 (2003): 166.
- ⁸ S. Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), x.
- ⁹ S. Friedlander, 'Introduction,' in S. Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3 (author's emphasis).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ¹² For specific examples of the influence of the 'grey zone' in these areas, see, respectively, J. Petropoulos and J. K. Roth (eds.), *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New York: Berghahn, 2005); T. Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. A. Denner & A. Pollack (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, [1991] 1999); D. Luban, 'A Man Lost in the Gray Zone,' *Law and History Review*, 19/1 (2001); T. Cole, *Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 248-49; J. K. Roth, 'In Response to Hannah Holtschneider,' in D. Patterson and J. K. Roth (eds.), *Fire in the Ashes: God, Evil, and the Holocaust*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 53-54; C. Card, 'Groping Through Gray Zones,' in C. Card (ed.), *On Feminist Ethics and Politics*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), B. Cheyette, 'The Uncertain Certainty of Schindler's List,' in Y. Loshitzky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); S. M. Hersh, 'The Gray Zone,' *The New Yorker*, 80/13 (2004). Levi's concept has also been recently applied to legal trials of 'privileged' prisoners in R. Wolf, 'Judgement in the Grey Zone: The Third Auschwitz (Kapo) Trial in Frankfurt 1968,' *Journal of Genocide Research*, 9/4 (2007).
- ¹³ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 41 & 43.
- ¹⁴ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 2002).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁷ D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 210, n.18.

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- ¹⁸ J. Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, the Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt's Narrative* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965); B. Sharpe, *Modesty and Arrogance in Judgment: Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Westport: Praeger, 1999).
- ¹⁹ H. Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York: Grove, 1978), 249.
- ²⁰ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edn. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, [1951] 1966), 452. Ironically, the potential dilemma of 'sending [one's] wife and children' to their deaths appears to more closely fit the circumstances of the Jewish police in the ghettos.
- ²¹ H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, revised edn. (New York: Penguin, [1965] 1994), 123.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 91. Members of the *Sonderkommandos* mainly worked with corpses and never handled the gas, therefore were not involved in the 'actual killing process.'
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ V. Brombert, *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature, 1830-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 8-9.
- ²⁵ R. Landau, 'The Holocaust: The Unique and the Universal,' in J. Davis (ed.), *Film, History and the Jewish Experience: A Reader*, (London: National Film Theatre, 1986), 11.
- ²⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 29.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ³⁰ P. Levi, *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, trans. S. Wood (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 20.
- ³¹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 42.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Quoted in A. Bravo and F. Cereja, 'The Duty of Memory (1983),' in M. Belpoliti and R. Gordon (eds.), *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-87*, (Cambridge: Polity, [1997] 2001), 245.
- ³⁴ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 27-28 (my emphasis).
- ³⁵ For extensive accounts of the collaboration of Vichy France with the Nazis, see B. M. Gordon, *Collaborationism in France during the Second World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); P. Webster, *Pétain's Crime: The Full Story of French Collaboration in the Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Pan, [1990] 2001).
- ³⁶ A. Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, ed. D. Forgacs & M. Reynolds, J. M. Dent, London, 1997, 454-55.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 487.
- ³⁸ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 39.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ⁴⁰ See the poem 'Ravens' in M. O'Siadhail, *The Gossamer Wall: Poems in Witness to the Holocaust* (St. Louis: Time Being, 2002), 72.
- ⁴¹ I. Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Melbourne: Text, (1998) 2000) 73-91.
- ⁴² See E. Friendler, B. Siebert, and A. Kilian, *Zeugen aus der Todeszone: Das Jüdische Sonderkommando in Auschwitz* (Lüneburg: Klampen, 2002). The volume is yet to be translated into English.
- ⁴³ Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*, 76.
- ⁴⁴ See *ibid.* 82-85.
- ⁴⁵ M. Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, trans. T. Kremer and R. Seaver (New York: Arcade, [1960] 1993), 68.
- ⁴⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* 38.
- ⁴⁷ Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* 86.
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- ⁵⁰ D. H. Hirsch, 'The Gray Zone or The Banality of Evil,' in J. K. Roth (ed.), *Ethics After the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses*, (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1999), 95.
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- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 174.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 173.
- ⁵⁸ L. L. Langer, 'The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps,' in A. Rosenberg and G. E. Myers (eds.), *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 121.
- ⁵⁹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 43.
- ⁶⁰ Quoted in Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, 201-2.