9. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York: Summit Books, 1986

Primo Levi (1919–1987) was a chemist, writer, and a Holocaust survivor.

Every victim is to be mourned, and every survivor is to be helped and pitied, but not all their acts should be set forth as examples. The inside of the Lager [German for (concentration) "camp"] was an intricate and stratified microcosm; the "gray zone" of which I shall speak later, that of 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 for the historian, the psychologist, and the sociologist. There is not a prisoner who does not remember this and who does not remember his amazement at the time: the first threats, the first insults, the first blows came not from the SS but from other prisoners, from "colleagues," from those mysterious personages who nevertheless wore the same striped tunic that they, the new arrivals, had just put on. This book means to contribute to the clarification of some aspects of the Lager phenomenon which still appear obscure. It also sets itself a more ambitious goal, to try to answer the most urgent question, the question which torments all those who have happened to read our accounts: How much of the concentration camp world is dead and will not return, like slavery and the dueling code? How much is back or is coming back? What can each of us do so that in this world pregnant with threats at least this threat will be nullified? (20–21)

The ascent of the privileged, not only in the Lager but in all human coexistence, is an anguishing but unfailing phenomenon: only in utopias is it absent. It is the duty of righteous men to make war on all undeserved privilege, but one must not forget that this is a war without end. Where power is exercised by few or only one against many, privilege is born and proliferates, even against the will of the power itself. On the other hand, it is normal for power to tolerate and encourage privilege. Let us confine ourselves to the Lager, which (even in its Soviet version) can be considered an excellent "laboratory": the hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary constitutes its armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature. This *gray zone* possessed an

incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge. (42)

The harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness, with all its infinite nuances and motivations, to collaborate: 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. All these motives, singly or combined, have come into play in the creation of this gray zone, whose components are bonded together by the wish to preserve and consolidate established privilege vis-à-vis those without privilege. (43)

COMMENTARY BY SARAH CUSHMAN

The "gray zone" is arguably Primo Levi's most important conceptual contribution to Holocaust studies. Levi's chapter on the Gray Zone is the second in his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, published in 1986 (1988 in English). Many regard it, his final book, as a condensation of all his writings about the Holocaust. Fundamentally, the Gray Zone underscores the complexity of the Holocaust as a historical event. Even as Levi tries to explain his concept, his discussion demonstrates just how difficult it is to unpack. In the course of his short essay, an array of issues, challenges, and debates that continue to animate the field of Holocaust Studies come to the fore. Levi warns about simplification and the glorification of survivors; cautions against judgement of privileged Jews during the Holocaust and analyzes privilege itself; delves into the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its continuity with history more broadly; and in so doing identifies potential "lessons" of the Holocaust. The result is a brilliant chapter characterized not only by great insight, but also by inconsistency—an inconsistency that, perhaps inadvertently, emphasizes his point. The Gray Zone idea has fostered explorations of many aspects of the Holocaust—regarding the *Sonderkommando* (see below) and the Jewish Councils, but also: complicity among German business leaders; social dynamics among children in hiding; uses of gender and sexuality by Nazis and those they targeted; deployment of humor during the Holocaust; representation, justice, restitution, and commemoration in the aftermath of the Holocaust; and even the behavior of members of the German Army. In short, Levi's model has enriched the field immeasurably.

Levi first applied the Gray Zone idea to prisoners in the Nazi camp system who had become functionaries and had collaborated (in Levi's characterization) with the camp SS in exchange for privilege—privilege that gave them, if not actual power, at least a sense of power vis-à-vis other prisoners. He noted that while "privileged prisoners were a minority within the Lager population; nevertheless they represent a potent majority among survivors." Perhaps portending the future or observing a tendency around him, Levi warned about mistaking survivors for saints. He asserted that "it is naïve, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims: on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them resemble itself." The Holocaust was not a character-building experience for survivors or anyone else. Survivors speak from experience, but it was a negative experience, not to be heard and absorbed uncritically, but rather to serve as a cautionary tale. Levi thus calls us to listen survivor testimony not only with open hearts, but also with questioning minds. Scholars' training prepares them to work amid this tension, but the broader public has more difficulty. Educators and scholars must help people understand that memory is fragile, that survivors have constrained perspectives, that they inadvertently omit from or add to their stories, especially when they are ethically opaque. Ruth Franklin, a literary critic, takes Levi's admonition a step further. She asserted in her book *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) that the unfettered admiration and adulation bestowed on survivors and the uncritical reading of their testimony feeds Holocaust denial. Reading uncritically creates space in which imposters can proffer falsehoods with impunity.

The Gray Zone Levi described encompasses a convergence and divergence of "masters and servants," and Levi admitted that conceptually the Gray Zone could apply to some perpetrators of the Holocaust. But "to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity: above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth." The worst pangs of conscience did not relegate perpetrators to victim status and the iniquities of any prisoner, privileged or otherwise, could not place them in the category of perpetrator. Yet Levi often seems to heap acrimony on privileged prisoners, confusing some with perpetrators when, for example, he characterized them as having become like those who ran the camps. Levi argued that "it is illogical to demand—and rhetorical and false to maintain—that [prisoners] all and always followed the behavior expected of saints and stoic philosophers." In the very next paragraph, however, Levi turned to the group he most closely associated with the Gray Zone, the

Sonderkommando [special work commando, SK]. The SK was a group of Jewish men whose forced labor involved operating the gas chambers and crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau, where massive numbers of Jews were murdered and their remains destroyed. Their tasks included calming prisoners and herding them into the gas chambers, transporting bodies from the gas chambers to the crematoria, burning bodies, and sorting goods stolen from those murdered. In exchange, the SK had access to items considered luxurious in the setting of a death camp. Levi termed members of the SK "collaborators," a designation that infers choice on the part of SK members to work with the perpetration.

Levi called for a suspension of judgment, but scholars, survivors, and others have found it very difficult to do so. The Gray Zone is dirty and few entered and remained unsullied by the experience. Levi himself seemed unable to withhold judgment. Among the motivations he ascribed to those in privileged positions were: "terror, ideological seduction, servile imitation[,] ... myopic desire for any power[,] ... cowardice, and ... lucid calculation." Hardly a judgment-free assessment. These very contradictions have spurred scholarship. Adam Brown, a professor of Media Studies, for example, dedicated an entire book (*Judging "Privileged" Jews*, Berghahn Books, 2013) to analyzing how many of those attempting to represent the Holocaust, beginning with Levi, have judged privileged Jews during the Holocaust. Navigating the Gray Zone and its many shades has proved a difficult, but worthwhile task that while not necessarily achieving freedom from judgements has certainly expanded our general understanding of what transpired in Nazi-occupied Europe and how Jews responded to it.

Levi did not see the Gray Zone as confined to the camps. He saw it in other parts of Nazi-occupied Europe, particularly among the Jewish Councils that oversaw eastern European ghettos. He also saw it throughout history in various locations and eras, and in a variety of organizations, including the mafia. In fact, he saw it anywhere "undeserved privilege" existed; everywhere, that is, except utopias. This idea that something inside the camps might inform experiences or phenomena outside the camps points to a debate that once raged among Holocaust scholars, but now simmers and bubbles: whether the Holocaust was unique or connected to other historical events. For Levi, "arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable; it did not conform to any model." The universe of the camps was unlike any other. Those who entered were unequipped to counter its assault because it was so different from what lay outside. Nothing was familiar. Adding to the shock: other prisoners—privileged prisoners—carried out the initial assault. Levi argued that the Lager

replicated the hierarchy of the totalitarian state, and that even outside the camps there were numerous people ready to compromise themselves in order to gain privilege. He emphasized that those who study the Lager experience not only can, but "must make war on all undeserved privileged, but one must not forget that this is a war without end."

One goal of Levi's book was to answer the questions of how much of the camp world is with us and what each of us can do to make sure its threat never becomes manifest again. For decades, scholars contended that the Holocaust was beyond comprehension, inexplicable, unique, incomparable, and impossible to describe or even talk about. All along the way, however, scholars and artists have tried to understand and explain, describe and represent, and even as efforts have fallen short, they remain imperative. The Holocaust often serves as the paradigmatic episode of genocide—it becomes a point of comparison. To compare or not to compare the Holocaust with other genocides remains a simmering question—a gray zone itself. Each genocide is unique—a topic of study in its own right, but trying to decipher what genocides have in common is the key to prevention. Levi would concur.

Levi ends his essay with a discussion of Chaim Rumkowski, the senior Jewish leader in the Lodz ghetto. Rumkowski was a complicated figure, who ruled the ghetto with an authoritarianism that seemed to ghetto denizens and historians alike altogether similar to that of the Nazis. His power and position could alleviate some of his suffering, but because he was Jewish, it could not save him. Levi saw Rumkowski not as a monster, but as a human being navigating the Gray Zone. "We are all mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours, it is our second nature, we hybrids molded from clay and spirit. ... [W]e too are 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." Levi urged us to stay vigilant and counter undeserved privilege; engage with the complexity of reality, which must confound an "us versus them" perspective; and resist the intoxication of power, which produces a syndrome characterized by "a distorted view of the world, dogmatic arrogance, the need for adulation, convulsive clinging to the levers of command, and contempt for the law." The walls and trains of our historical moment may not be those of the Holocaust. The most difficult challenge may not be to denounce the privilege of others, but rather to recognize and renounce our own.