

## CONCLUSION

# “AND WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?” NEGOTIATING THE PARADOXICAL BIND



The Holocaust did not pronounce the death of ethics, but it did prove that ethics is immensely vulnerable, that it can be misused and perverted, and that no simple reaffirmation of pre-Holocaust ethics, as if nothing had happened, will do any more. Too much has happened for that, including the fact that the shadow of Birkenau so often shows Western religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions to be problematic.

—John K. Roth, *Ethics During and After the Holocaust: In the Shadow of Birkenau*

**E**ven though the far-reaching implications of the Holocaust have caused many scholars to take little for granted when reflecting on ethics, I do not argue that the event has propelled humanity into an ethical abyss. It would perhaps be too easy to exclaim “Enough!” and banish the Holocaust from human history and discourse, into some transcendental realm that is beyond all hope of understanding. Yet the *necessity* of continued efforts to represent and—to whatever extent possible—comprehend the magnitude of the event and the extreme experiences it entailed counterbalances any claim that the Holocaust is fundamentally impossible to come to grips with. Drawing on Primo Levi’s aversion to Manichean allegories and his warning against moral judgment, Shoshana Felman writes that “the moral implications of the Holocaust

are such that our task today is to find ways, precisely, to *rearticulate* the question of ethics outside the problematic—and the comfort—of a judgment that can be delegated to no human tribunal.”<sup>1</sup> While replete with unresolved tensions, shifting meanings, and contradictions, the value of Levi’s attempt to do this in his writing on the grey zone is clear. The common tendency to judge “privileged” Jews according to clear-cut moral distinctions reveals that the problems of judgment and representation are ongoing.

The field of philosophy has recently granted the Holocaust substantial attention, although the vast majority of texts have focused on subjects other than the behavior of victims. Major themes include the “ordinariness” of the perpetrators who committed this extraordinary evil, the utter incomprehensibility of this evil, and the theological problems associated with the existence of God amidst such evil. 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. 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 does briefly dwell 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 judgment: “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.”<sup>2</sup> However, Agamben’s blurring of persecutors and the persecuted in his characterization of the grey zone as a realm in which “victims become executioners and executioners become victims” clearly signals a departure from Levi’s ideas.<sup>3</sup> As Dominick LaCapra points out in his critique of Agamben’s work, Levi’s grey zone raises “the question of the existence and extent of problematic—at times more or less dubiously hybridised—cases, but it does not imply the rashly generalized blurring or simple collapse of all distinctions, including that between perpetrator and victim.”<sup>4</sup>

In popular culture in particular, but also in other areas, the glorification of victims and demonization of perpetrators arguably remains the dominant paradigm of Holocaust reflection and representation. Given the immense suffering of the victims and the invariably enigmatic nature of perpetrator and collaborator behavior, this is perhaps understandable, but a Manichean framework is also dangerous. Many contemporary university students whom I have met still share these clear-cut ideas about “good” and “evil” in relation to the Holocaust; nonetheless, they *are* open to (and interested in) the ambiguities of the grey zone. Such ambi-

guities need not be taboo. Cultural and historical representations—and the continued scholarly criticism of these—play an important role in mediating the emotionally and morally fraught issue of “privileged” Jews. With this in mind, this book has explored the interconnected problems of representation and judgment in relation to these victims. Constituting an intrinsically important, frequently overlooked, and hastily judged facet of the Holocaust, the issue of “privileged” Jews needs to be traversed with care and sensitivity, and I hope that this study takes one of many steps toward a more complex and nuanced understanding of “privileged” Jews’ experiences.

Debates over Holocaust representation are ongoing. Alvin H. Rosenfeld has recently warned of the devastating impact of cultural *misrepresentations* such as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*, which he sees as contributing to “the end of the Holocaust” in public consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The prioritization of “authentic” or “faithful” representations over “false” or “simplistic” ones (although it is difficult to define exactly what these categories involve) can be justified by pointing to the danger of misrepresentations leading to “an incipient rejection of the Holocaust rather than its retention in historical memory.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Ronald Aronson contends that language “must be rethought in light of both the massive masking and distorting functions it assumed during the Holocaust, and its weakness in rendering what happened.”<sup>7</sup> The paucity of language, or what Lawrence L. Langer describes as “the inadequate mediating efforts of the world,”<sup>8</sup> is particularly evident in attempts to represent the ethical dilemmas of “privileged” Jews.

On the other hand, Libby Saxton’s dismissal of the notion of the “limits of representation” informs her recent argument, which I believe has considerable merit, that depictions of the Holocaust on film can be the “object and vehicle of ethical inquiry.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, I would argue that Saxton’s contention that “to articulate moral limits or interdictions on representation can become a strategy for evading a properly ethical confrontation with the event” does not encompass the difficulties inherent in the representation of “privileged” Jews.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is the articulation and investigation of the limit of judgment that enables one to understand the possibilities for representing these liminal figures in the first place. The obstacles to, and potentialities of, Holocaust representation are interconnected. While admitting that “completely resolving the uncertainties and ambiguities” of the behavior of “privileged” Jews in the ghettos—and, by extension, the camps—is impossible, Martin Dean emphasizes the need for nuanced reflections on their extreme situations: “Reconstructing the dilemmas of those caught in the Nazi trap and attempting to understand their perception is now more important

than engaging in further harsh moral criticism of Jewish responses to this unprecedented threat.”<sup>11</sup>

In its contribution to the debates over Holocaust representation, this book has highlighted the need for continuing (re)evaluations of the limits and the possibilities of portraying “privileged” Jews. The introduction outlined their extreme situations and explored the crucial juncture between judgment and representation that underpins various interpretations of, and controversies over, their behavior. I suggested that the ethical dilemmas faced by “privileged” Jews challenge, if not undermine, traditional notions of heroism, dignity, and choice, and pose considerable obstacles for the analyst (and the artist) in the continual search for understanding. Taking into account the problems raised by Levi’s paradigmatic essay on the grey zone, I then analyzed the limit of judgment in Levi’s writings, Raul Hilberg’s work, and in examples of documentary and fiction films. The analysis revealed that the conventions deployed by survivors, historians, and filmmakers frequently influence the ways in which they convey judgment.

In response to the frequent tendency to appropriate, often uncritically, the concept of the grey zone for purposes other than to engage with the issue of “privileged” Jews, chapter 1 returned to Levi’s original concept. Undertaking a close analysis of Levi’s work and influences, the chapter exposed the paradox of judgment at the center of his conceptualization of the grey zone. This paradox consists of an irresolvable tension between the grey zone being simultaneously an indecipherable realm and a moral spectrum, revealing that Levi himself could not abstain from judging those he argues should not be judged. Through his use of literary analogies and other devices, Levi judges, albeit in a nuanced manner, the “privileged” Jews he represents.

The close reading of Hilberg’s work in chapter 2 revealed that he judges “privileged” Jews in diverse ways, both explicit and implicit, depending on the analytic framework employed in his representation. The various techniques used in Hilberg’s seminal text, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, position Jewish leaders as cogs in the “machinery of destruction,” while Hilberg’s tripartite analysis in *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders* constructs a moral spectrum of culpability along which individual *Judenrat* officials are placed. Hilberg’s work is characterized by a certainty that judgment can be made; he seldom reflects on the choiceless choices confronted by “privileged” Jews. His intense engagement with the diary of Adam Czerniakow is also replete with moral judgment—even though he seems to empathize with the Jewish leader at times. The crucial importance of Hilberg’s controversial work and persona is further evident in the mediatory position he fills between

Levi's writings and Holocaust film, particularly through his crucial influence on, and presence in, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*.

While a considerable literature has recently explored the representation of the Holocaust in film, this book provides the first analysis of how "privileged" Jews are portrayed in the medium. Chapter 3 investigated the ways in which documentary filmmakers convey judgments according to the modes of representation they adopt. By positioning Hilberg and his judgments within the frame, Lanzmann's *Shoah* reveals that the possibilities for the depiction of "privileged" Jews in film differ considerably from those in Hilberg's history. Indeed, Lanzmann's editing technique can be seen to challenge Hilberg's negative evaluation of Czerniakow's state of knowledge and behavior. Nonetheless, implicit judgments are constructed in *Shoah* through the juxtaposition of continued anti-Semitism on the part of perpetrators and what Lanzmann portrays as the perpetual suffering of surviving members of the *Sonderkommandos*. Lanzmann's employment or rejection of certain film techniques was compared and contrasted with more conventional Holocaust documentaries, principally Tor Ben-Mayor and Dan Setton's *Kapo*. Engaging directly with the issue of "privileged" Jews, the expository mode of representation in *Kapo*, which relies on an authoritative narrative voiceover, an emotive musical score, and the inclusion and problematic use of archival footage, results in clear-cut judgments. The more self-conscious, open-ended aspects of Lanzmann's *Shoah*, on the other hand, which seem at times to eschew adopting a clear assertive stance, appear to reveal some potential to approach a suspension of judgment in documentary film.

In the final substantive chapter, I argued that the exposure of the image in self-reflexive representations of "privileged" Jews has the potential to provide a particularly nuanced representation. Even so, the preoccupation of many mainstream films with themes of resistance and rescue frequently results in the behavior of these figures being marginalized. Spielberg uses humor and sentimentality to construct binary oppositions between several of his characters in *Schindler's List*. The film's main "privileged" figure, Marcel Goldberg, is judged negatively in order to emphasize Schindler's exploits and then redeemed by the German rescuer's virtuous deeds. On the other hand, several recent fiction films reject Spielberg's redemptory aesthetic. Through a sophisticated emotional and intellectual distancing of the audience; a flexible adaptation of sources; an unconventional portrayal of unsympathetic, fictionalized characters; and a rejection of Hollywood tropes such as sentimentality, Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone* captures the "essence" of the unprecedented ethical dilemmas that confronted "privileged" Jews. Counter to

Levi's skepticism of the possibility of representing these liminal figures on film, I argued that Nelson's dramatization of members of the twelfth Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* depicts their traumatic experiences in a nuanced manner and approaches the suspension of judgment that Levi requires—even though, as a close analysis of the film revealed, a subtle form of judgment remains.

While the subject of “privileged” Jews has often been considered taboo and no study has previously focused specifically on the problem of judgment in representations of their experiences, “privileged” Jews appear, to varying degrees, in Holocaust representations of all kinds. There are therefore many potential avenues of future research. Indeed, despite the intense controversies surrounding *Judenrat* officials of Eastern European ghettos, continued calls have been made for a comprehensive account of Jewish leaders.<sup>12</sup> The analysis of Hilberg's work and several films highlighted major examples of representations of “privileged” Jews in historical writing, documentaries, and fiction films; however, there are many other depictions within these genres that deserve critical attention. Likewise, many more histories and films will undoubtedly be produced in future years that engage with notions of moral ambiguity and “compromise” in relation to victim behavior. Particularly significant is the explicit engagement with the issue of “privileged” Jews in a growing number of fiction films. The fact that the most recent feature of this kind, Stefan Ruzowitzky's *The Counterfeiters*, won widespread critical acclaim and the 2008 Academy Award for best foreign language film perhaps signifies—or has even resulted in—an increased interest in the ethical dilemmas that “privileged” Jews confronted during the Holocaust. Filmmakers' expectations of their audience and audiences' expectations of films are subject to constant readjustment, rendering any discussion of the representation of “privileged” Jews in continual need of reappraisal.

The examination of the treatment(s) of “privileged” Jews can also be extended to other genres. An exploration of how judgments are passed in written survivor testimonies other than Levi's can extend further the findings of chapter 1,<sup>13</sup> whereas an analysis of the role of the interviewer in Holocaust video testimonies reveals that judgments of “privileged” Jews are constructed in considerably different ways from those highlighted in this book.<sup>14</sup> Other forms of representation beyond the scope of the present discussion include literature, visual art, theater, and Holocaust monuments and museums. Furthermore, while this book analyzes the representation of Jews who held “privileged” positions during the Holocaust, it must be kept in mind that in the camps, Jewish inmates comprised a minority of prisoner-functionaries. The judgment and rep-

resentation of “privileged” prisoners of the Nazis in general is also an important area of future research.

Expressing sentiments akin to Levi, and even gesturing to the paradox of judgment central to the grey zone, Saul Friedländer writes:

In the face of simplified representations of the past, the historian’s duty is to reintroduce the complexity of discrete historical events, the ambiguity of human behavior, and the indeterminacy of wider social processes. The task is daunting, especially given the difficulty of conciliating the nuanced results of scholarship and the necessary reference to historical, moral, and philosophical categories.<sup>15</sup>

I noted earlier that Yehuda Bauer’s attitude toward the behavior of “privileged” Jews in *Rethinking the Holocaust* (2001) is somewhat more sympathetic than Hilberg’s, yet this was not the first time he addressed the issue. In an essay written in the 1980s, he asks: “Have we a moral right to consider this subject? Is there not an insufferable pretentiousness in our discussion which pronounces judgment, gives a verdict on these Judenrat Councils ...?” Bauer acknowledges the problem of judgment here and the potential need to suspend it, but he points out that judgment cannot be lightly cast aside—that it is, indeed, inevitable. He goes on to write that “this is just where the trouble lies: if we seriously intend to refrain from passing judgment, we must stop studying these events entirely, for every historian judges where he will or not [*sic*], through the very selection of the facts which he recounts.”<sup>16</sup> The paradoxical impossibility and inevitability of judging “privileged” Jews can thus be considered paramount in addressing the ways in which historians (and others) represent them. Bauer continues by proclaiming that: “The responsibility is terrible. We have no right to judge; nobody authorized us to do so: we judge without being appointed for the task, because we have no alternative.”<sup>17</sup> Just as scholars and artists will and should continue to represent the circumstances and behavior of “privileged” Jews, judgments of these figures will undeniably follow.

In approaching the ethical dilemmas of “privileged” Jews such as Salmen Lewenthal, with whom this book began, even such a nuanced and sophisticated concept as the grey zone cannot satisfy its own requirements of suspending judgment. In the case of the *Sonderkommandos*, for instance, it would seem impossible to completely fulfill 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.”<sup>18</sup> The need to imagine the unimaginable, represent the unrepresentable, and judge those who should not be judged has been shown to cause fundamental and unresolved problems for Levi and many others. The simultaneous

impossibility and inevitability of judgment may be termed a paradoxical bind in which Levi himself was entangled. Indeed, I opened this book with the qualification that my own judgments might well impinge on the analysis undertaken. Other readers or viewers of the texts examined may also be located within this bind, which is most evident when considering the self-reflexive but nonetheless rhetorical question asked of the audience by Nelson's film: "What would you have done in the same situation?"

How then are we to understand the experiences of "privileged" Jews? Perhaps one approach is to reflect on the choiceless choices 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. Following this line, Günther Anders's 1961 poem entitled "What Would You Have Done?" self-consciously addresses the problem of attempting to comprehend the experiences of the *Sonderkommandos* 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?"<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

1. Shoshana Felman, "After the Apocalypse: Paul de Man and the Fall to Silence," in Felman and Laub *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, 123 (author's emphasis).



2. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 2002), 21.
3. Ibid., 17. For more on Agamben's problematic appropriation of Levi's grey zone, see Adam Brown, "The Trauma of 'Choiceless Choices': The Paradox of Judgment in Primo Levi's 'Grey Zone,'" in Sharpe, Noonan and Freddi, *Trauma, Historicity, Philosophy*, 148–52; Dominick LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben," in Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, *Witnessing the Disaster*; Debarati Sanyal, "A Soccer Match in Auschwitz: Passing Culpability in Holocaust Criticism," *Representations* 79, no. 1 (2002).
4. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 79.
5. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).
6. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Another Revisionism: Popular Culture and the Changing Image of the Holocaust," in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 91.
7. Ronald Aronson, "The Holocaust and Human Progress," in Rosenberg and Myers, *Echoes from the Holocaust*, 223.
8. Langer, *Versions of Survival*, 5.
9. Saxton, *Haunted Images*, 3.
10. Ibid., 2.
11. Martin Dean, "Life and Death in the 'Gray Zone' of Jewish Ghettos in Nazi-Occupied Europe: The Unknown, the Ambiguous, and the Disappeared," in Petropoulos and Roth, *Gray Zones*, 218.
12. See Yehuda Bauer, "Contemporary Research on the Holocaust," in Kwiet and Matthäus, *Contemporary Responses to the Holocaust*, 10–11.
13. For an example of this kind of analysis, see Brown, "Traumatic Memory and Holocaust Testimony."
14. See Brown, "Confronting 'Choiceless Choices' in Holocaust Videotestimonies: Judgment, 'Privileged' Jews, and the Role of the Interviewer." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Communication Studies—Special Issue: Interrogating Trauma: Arts & Media Responses to Collective Suffering* 24, no. 1 (February 2010).
15. Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian," in Roth and Salas, *Disturbing Remains*, 279.
16. Yehuda Bauer, "The Judenräte: Some Conclusions," in Marrus, *The Nazi Holocaust*, 165.
17. Ibid., 166. It is nonetheless interesting that Bauer distances himself both from "the anti-Judenrat approach," which transforms the term "*Judenrat*" into "a sharply derogatory term," and from what he calls the "super-apologetic attitude ... which understands everything and forgives everything." Ibid., 172. This sentiment evidently bears similarities to Levi's ideas on the problem of judgment.
18. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 43.
19. Quoted in Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, 201–2.