

‘No one will ever know’

The Holocaust, ‘privileged’ Jews and the ‘grey zone’

Adam Brown

This paper explores the problems of judgement and representation in relation to Jewish victims of the Holocaust who occupied so-called privileged positions in the camps and ghettos. Such figures, forced to act in ways that have proven controversial both during and after the war, faced unprecedented ethical dilemmas under Nazi persecution. Taking Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi’s highly influential essay on the ‘grey zone’ as a point of departure, I examine the extreme situations confronted by prisoner doctors, an important – though little discussed – category of ‘privileged’ Jews. Investigating the synergies between history, memory and film, I focus particularly on the case of Gisella Perl, a prisoner doctor whose experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau are represented in her memoir and a recent fiction film. The emotionally and morally fraught circumstances of prisoner doctors can never be fully understood, yet reflecting on the double binds they faced, and acknowledging the inherent problems involved in representing and judging them, enables a nuanced approach to the moral complexities of the Holocaust.

This article has been peer-reviewed.

No one will ever know what it meant to me to destroy these babies. After years and years of medical practice, childbirth was still to me the most beautiful, the greatest miracle of nature. I loved those newborn babies not as a doctor but as a mother and it was again and again my own child whom I killed to save the life of a woman.

Gisella Perl *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, Salem: Ayer Company 1992 (1948), 82.

This passage highlights the traumatic experiences of Gisella Perl, a survivor of the Holocaust who performed a large number of secret

abortions in her role as a prisoner doctor in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In doing so, Perl saved the lives of the mothers, who would invariably have been sent to the gas chambers had the Nazis discovered their pregnancies. At the same time, Perl assisted the notorious Dr Josef Mengele with his pseudo-scientific medical experiments. The ambiguous behaviour of Perl was the subject of considerable controversy after the war.

Perl belongs to the important category of so-called privileged Jews, those prisoners in the Nazi-controlled camps and ghettos who held positions which gave them access to material and other benefits beyond those available to other Jews.¹ 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. When confronted with the traumatic circumstances of 'privileged' Jews, the practice of casting judgement becomes highly contentious. The extreme situations these liminal figures faced, and their responses to these situations, give rise to complex and sensitive issues of judgement and representation. Scholars have generally neglected these problems; nonetheless, historians, writers and artists frequently portray 'privileged' Jews.

The influential Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, who had been incarcerated in a different part of the Auschwitz complex at the same time as Perl, reflected on 'privileged' Jews in his paradigmatic essay entitled 'The Grey Zone'. Levi argues that moral evaluations of Jews *in extremis* should be suspended, stressing the need to resist ethical Manicheanisms and acknowledge ambiguity. I adopt an interdisciplinary perspective to examine the interrelated problems of judgement and representation surrounding the issue of 'privileged' Jews, investigating the intersection between memory, history and film. Perl's story – both narrated in her memoir and dramatised in a recent fiction film – can never be comprehended fully; nonetheless, reflecting on Perl as a figure of the 'grey zone' allows a nuanced exploration of the ethical dilemmas she faced. When endeavouring to understand the experiences of 'privileged' Jews, one must first consider the context of unprecedented persecution in which their actions took place.

1 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. Indeed, the use of the term 'privileged' in relation to victims in the camps and ghettos has been far from consistent. For example, Marlene Heinemann's analysis of camp inmate relations in Holocaust testimonies is partly divided into 'privileged' and 'less privileged' prisoners. See Marlene E Heinemann *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust*, Westport: Greenwood 1986, 87–108.

Unprecedented persecution: the ethical dilemmas of 'privileged' Jews

While it is important to avoid value judgements based on the 'measurement' of suffering of different groups – whether among Jewish prisoners or between Jews and non-Jews – the distinction of 'privileged' Jews is fundamental to the development of a deeper understanding of the Holocaust and its moral implications. Indeed, 'privileged' was a term commonly used by other prisoners to describe these individuals.² As Susan Pentlin argues in her essay, 'Holocaust Victims of Privilege', it is crucial that one listens to the 'voices from the grey zone' by exploring the often taboo issues of 'position and privilege'.³ Levi himself writes that the number of 'prisoners who in some measure, perhaps with good intentions, collaborated with the authority, was not negligible, indeed it constituted a phenomenon of fundamental importance'.⁴ Levi separates the category of 'privileged' prisoners at issue here from both the 'unprivileged' prisoners and the 'picturesque fauna' of 'low-ranking functionaries', who included 'sweepers, kettle washers, night-watchmen, bed smoothers ... checkers of lice and scabies, messengers, interpreters [and] assistants' assistants'.⁵ While distinctions between these victims and 'privileged' Jews are important, all Jews shared much in common under Nazi rule; hence the socio-political context of the behaviour of 'privileged' Jews must always be acknowledged.

What prominent historian Yehuda Bauer termed the 'unprecedentedness' of the Holocaust⁶ is exemplified in the incarceration of Jews in the camps and ghettos, particularly in Eastern Europe, where the normal concepts of 'choice' and 'responsibility' were radically undermined. An intrinsic part of the Nazi system of dehumanisation involved the establishment of a complex network of 'privileged' prisoners to be responsible for aspects of the administration of, and discipline in, the ghettos and camps.⁷ It must be noted that conditions in these settings varied markedly, both geographically and temporally; thus it is difficult

2 Primo Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. R Rosenthal, London: Michael Joseph 1988, 26–27.

3 Susan L Pentlin 'Holocaust victims of privilege,' in Harry James Cargas (ed) *Problems Unique to the Holocaust*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999, 39, 26.

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

5 Ibid, 29.

6 Yehuda Bauer *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2002, 20.

7 For details of prisoner hierarchies in the camps, see Paul R Bartrop *Surviving the Camps: Unity in Adversity During the Holocaust*, Lanham: University Press of America 2000, 27–31.

to generalise. Isaiah Trunk's detailed study of the Jewish leadership in the ghettos demonstrates that although there were extensive differences between ghettos, in every one a façade of 'ghetto autonomy' was used by the Nazis to disguise 'the satanic purpose of using the victim himself [sic] to assist the hangman in his work'.⁸ The ethical dilemmas that 'privileged' Jews confronted in the ghettos are epitomised in the establishment of the *Judenräte* (Jewish councils) and *Ordnungsdienst* (Jewish police).

The role of the Jewish councils, which were directly responsible for carrying out Nazi policies and overseeing the daily operation of the ghettos, has been the subject of intense debate among historians. Supervised and often abused (verbally and physically) by the Nazi administration, the *Judenräte* were made responsible for registering and housing the Jewish population, distributing life-prolonging work permits, organising health, education and sanitation services, rationing the always-inadequate food supply and providing the required number of Jews for forced labour. Faced with massive unemployment, overcrowding, hunger and epidemics, Jewish leaders found themselves in an impossible situation. After 1941, some council members were forced to draw up lists of people demanded by the Nazis for deportation to 'the East', although due to their captors' efforts at secrecy, it was seldom clear that this meant certain death. Also involved in these activities were the widely condemned Jewish police forces. Armed with truncheons and sometimes whips, Jewish police were charged with keeping order in the ghettos, enforcing Nazi regulations, guarding fences and *Judenrat* institutions, collecting property confiscated by the SS and, most controversially, escorting fellow Jews, sometimes through violent means, to the trains bound for extermination camps. Jewish police often had to arrest a daily 'quota' of people for deportation lest they suffer the same fate.

Formed metaphorically, if not literally, at gunpoint, these organisations provided victims with the opportunity to prolong one's life and the lives of one's family through the provision of extra food, freedom of movement, exemptions from searches and evictions and (at least initially) immunity from deportation. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that the establishment of the ghettos and later internment of Jews in labour and extermination camps was only to be a temporary measure. Whatever physical or other benefits they may have gained for their cooperation

8 Isaiah Trunk 'The organizational structure of the Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe', in Livia Rothkirchen (ed) *Yad Vashem Studies on the European Jewish Catastrophe and Resistance VII*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem 1968, 147.

with their persecutors, 'privileged' Jews experienced immense suffering and were, along with all other Jewish victims, intended to perish. In the end, most 'privileged' Jews did not survive the Holocaust.

Many Jews in the ghettos (and others who did not experience them) were subsequently imprisoned in camps, which took various forms but which all utilised Nazi-imposed prisoner hierarchies and positions of 'privilege'. Prisoners in the camps were subjected to primitive living conditions, constant fear, rampant disease, long hours of meaningless manual labour and roll calls in extreme weather, limited access to sanitary and medical facilities, random physical beatings, continuous 'selections' and an intentional policy of starvation. Importantly, most 'privileged' positions in the camps were automatically allocated to *non-Jewish* inmates, particularly criminals and political prisoners, although the number of Jewish prisoner-functionaries increased towards the end of war due to a shortage of labour. Having access to better shelter, increased rations and other items for trade, 'privileged' inmates were less vulnerable to – though not immune from – camp punishments. The behaviour of the 'Prominents', in charge of barracks and sub-sections of the camps, and the *Kapos* (chiefs), who supervised manual labour squads, has proven an especially controversial subject. *Kapos* are infamous in survivor literature for their brutal treatment of their subordinates, with some even taking part in 'selections' for the gas chambers. Significantly, *Kapos* were subject to punishment by Nazi guards for any problems arising from their charges and Jewish *Kapos* were arguably under more pressure to keep their positions through violence.⁹

While Auschwitz is not representative of the Holocaust as a whole, key 'categories' of 'privileged' Jews in this setting serve to further highlight the unprecedented ethical dilemmas many victims faced. Auschwitz comprised three main camps and various satellite labour camps,¹⁰ although the systematic gassing of 'privileged' Jews in the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau (or 'Auschwitz II') saw Jewish prisoners faced with

9 See Primo Levi *If This is a Man; and, The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf, London: Abacus 1995 (1979), 96–97. For further reflections on *Kapos*, which highlight the varied circumstances and judgments that have been attributed to them, see Elie A Cohen *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp*, trans. M H Braaksma, London: Jonathan Cape 1954, 200–203; David Rousset *A World Apart*, trans. Yvonne Moyses and Roger Senhouse, London: Secker and Warburg 1951 (1946), 78–81.

10 For a detailed discussion of the complex structure of Auschwitz, see Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds) *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1998; Herman Langbein 'Auschwitz: the history and characteristics of the concentration and extermination camp', in Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (eds) *The Nazi Concentration Camps: Structure and Aims, The Image of the Prisoner, The Jews in the Camps. Proceedings of the Fourth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, Jerusalem, January 1980*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem 1984, 273–289.

particularly extreme conditions. Up to 1000 men at a time were forced to work in Birkenau's gas chambers and crematoria as members of the *Sonderkommando* ('Special Squad').¹¹ 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. 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 to cooperate was answered with immediate death. Survival invariably came down to chance.

Significantly, the Holocaust survivor Lucie Adelsberger writes that the members of the *Sonderkommando*

were well paid for their labours. They were allowed to take whatever they wanted from the booty, including cigarettes and brandy. On the other hand, they had their own death sentence in their pocket.¹²

As a prisoner doctor in Auschwitz, it is also noteworthy that Adelsberger herself held a 'privileged' position. Nonetheless, while a substantial literature in recent years has discussed the traumatic experiences of members of the *Sonderkommandos*,¹³ comparatively little attention has been given to the ethical dilemmas confronting prisoner doctors and the ambiguous behaviour they were frequently forced to take part in.

Although Auschwitz had been established in 1940, prisoner doctors only began to appear in significant numbers from late 1942 onwards.¹⁴ Throughout the initial months of Auschwitz's operation, there was practically no medical treatment available to prisoners. As the war drew on and (slave) labour became more limited, conditions in the camp improved to some extent. While prisoner doctors were usually singled out for their

11 Varying, though always smaller, numbers of Jewish prisoners made up the *Sonderkommandos* in the death camps of Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka.

12 Lucie Adelsberger *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story*, Boston: Northeastern University Press 1995, 79.

13 Recent studies of the *Sonderkommandos* include Gideon Greif *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2005; Eric Friedler, Barbara Siebert and Andreas Kilian *Zeugen aus der Todeszone: Das Jüdische Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*, Luneburg: Klampen 2002.

14 Robert Jay Lifton *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, Basic 2000 (1986), 214.

previous medical training upon arrival at the camp, many spent time as 'common' prisoners and were subjected to the harsh conditions and brutal treatment by those above them in the camp hierarchy. Nonetheless, once they took up their roles as prisoner doctors, their 'privileged' positions afforded them many advantages. Access to extra rations to combat hunger or barter for other goods, indoor work rather than hard labour in extreme temperatures, and relative immunity from 'selections' and roll-calls made survival (or at least a prolonged life) more likely.

Prisoner doctors in Auschwitz could use their positions to help both themselves and others, and the vast majority did so; however, the complexities of their situation render attempts to understand Jewish responses to persecution more difficult than is commonly acknowledged. The historiographical debate over what constitutes Jewish 'resistance' during the Holocaust has often stalemated between those who argue it is characterised only by direct, armed action, and those who extend the concept to incorporate more 'passive' forms.¹⁵ In both perspectives, 'resistance' is generally perceived as consisting of clear-cut, virtuous acts which can be portrayed in an unambiguous, 'heroic' manner. At the end of her essay on the so-called hospitals in Auschwitz, Irena Strzelecka writes that prisoner doctors 'made great efforts to counteract the role of camp hospitals in the extermination ... Hospital work was one of the few jobs in the camp which prisoners performed with dedication and commitment.'¹⁶ However, the experiences and behaviour of prisoner doctors were far from uniform, and often highly controversial.

Acts of 'resistance' by prisoner doctors could include hiding patients from 'selections' for the gas, contributing to the organised underground Resistance, bribing guards or falsifying diagnoses or blood tests to disguise cases of disease. This last undertaking could help prevent mass 'disinfections', which led to the gassing of several entire blocks of prisoners. With medicine and implements in short supply, even kind words of encouragement, which were often the only treatment available, could be seen to constitute 'resistance'. Any subversive act carried the risk of grave penalties for the offender. The situation of Jewish prisoner doctors was particularly precarious, as any extension of life was intended

15 See the opposing views expressed in Raul Hilberg *The Destruction of the European Jews*, revised edn, vol 3, New York: Holmes & Meier 1985, 1030–1044 and Yehuda Bauer *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness*, London: Macmillan 1980, 27–40. For a useful survey of the broader debate over 'resistance,' see Michael R Marrus *The Holocaust in History*, London: Penguin 1993 (1987), 133–140.

16 Irena Strzelecka 'Hospitals', in Gutman and Berenbaum (eds) *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 391.

to be only temporary. All Jews were to be killed, hence survival itself can be seen to constitute a passive means of subverting Nazi goals. On the other hand, prisoner doctors frequently engaged in activities that do not seem to be readily classifiable as 'resistance'. Indeed, little attention has been paid to the inherently ambiguous nature of some acts of 'resistance' on the part of victims in general, let alone on the part of 'privileged' Jews.

A reading of the various memoirs written by prisoner doctors after their liberation exposes the often ambiguous experiences of men and women who worked in the 'hospitals' and experimentation blocks of Auschwitz. Prisoner doctors often developed cooperative, sometimes friendly, bonds with the SS doctors supervising them, and some prisoner doctors contributed to the numerous pseudo-scientific research projects that took place in the camp. For instance, Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jew, served as Mengele's chief pathologist in the Birkenau camp. Nyiszli's memoir recounts in detail his many dissections of murdered twins and other victims of Mengele's 'curiosities', along with his role as physician to the *Sonderkommando* and the SS.¹⁷ Many prisoner doctors were involved to a greater or lesser extent in 'selections' for the gas chambers, whether they were required to identify the weakest and most ill, or even handpick prisoners themselves.¹⁸

To complicate matters further, some prisoner doctors were engaged in acts of resistance while *simultaneously* contributing to the Nazis' destructive goals. It should be noted that Nyiszli successfully negotiated the transfer of his wife and daughter to a 'safer' work camp away from Birkenau, and kept secret his awareness of the *Sonderkommando*'s preparations for an armed revolt in 1944. Perl's aforementioned participation in Mengele's experiments while conducting abortions to save women's lives is another case in point, revealing that 'resistance' on the part of Jewish prisoner doctors could, due to the extreme situations they found themselves in, be inherently ambiguous, and hence should not be viewed in a traditionally 'heroic' light.

Prisoner doctors were invariably faced with what Lawrence Langer has termed 'choiceless choices', which he defines as 'crucial decisions [which] did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of

17 Miklos Nyiszli *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, trans. Tibere Kremer and Richard Seaver, New York: Arcade 1993 (1960).

18 This task was generally reserved for SS doctors, camp guards or non-Jewish prisoner doctors. Additionally, some prisoner doctors displayed favouritism towards prisoners of their own national groups, and the anti-Semitism of some German or Polish inmates made Jews – even Jewish prisoner doctors – particular targets of beatings and 'selections'. See Lifton *The Nazi Doctors*, 239–250.

abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing'.¹⁹ Confronted with these (a)moral dilemmas, prisoner doctors found themselves, by necessity, prioritising one life over another. The need to fill the Nazis' 'daily quota' for the gas chambers invariably meant that saving the life of one meant death for another. Ella Lingens-Reiner, a German political prisoner, writes in her memoir of the dilemma she faced in trying to use her 'privileged' position as camp doctor to help others: 'If I rescued one woman, I pushed another to her doom, another who wanted to live and had an equal right to live ... Was there any sense in trying to behave decently?'²⁰ Some prisoner doctors killed other inmates directly, whether conspiring to kill prisoner *Kapos* who were considered particularly sadistic or dangerous, or taking a life out of 'mercy' or to save others. The efforts of Perl and other prisoner doctors in aborting fetuses or smothering newborn infants to save their mothers constitute one example among many of the 'choiceless choices' that faced 'privileged' Jews. These kinds of actions led to immense feelings of guilt on the part of surviving victims, both during and after the Holocaust, and have often attracted strong moral judgements by those who represent their experiences.

The 'grey zone', survivor testimony and the case of Gisella Perl

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.²¹

'Privileged' Jews constitute an intrinsically important, frequently misunderstood and hastily judged facet of the Holocaust. In light of the widespread and problematic condemnation of the behaviour of these figures, Levi situated 'privileged' Jews in what he called the 'grey zone', a concept that had evolved in his mind over several decades since his incarceration in Auschwitz III, the Buna-Monowitz labour camp.²² The concept of the 'grey zone' proved fundamental to Levi's understanding of his Auschwitz experience and has since been appropriated, often

19 Lawrence L Langer *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1982, 72.

20 Ella Lingens-Reiner *Prisoners of Fear*, London: Victor Gollancz 1948, 82.

21 Massimo Giuliani *Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking*, Lanham: Lexington 2003, 45.

22 Ian Thomson *Primo Levi: A Life*, New York: Henry Holt and Company 2002, 470.

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.²³ Recent interpretations and appropriations of the 'grey zone' often misunderstand, expand upon or intentionally depart from Levi's ideas. This paper therefore seeks to return to Levi's own concept of the 'grey zone' as spelt out in his essay, which is chiefly concerned with *Kapos*, the members of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommandos* and the controversial Jewish 'Elder' Chaim Rumkowski of the Lodz Ghetto. While Levi does not explicitly situate prisoner doctors within the 'grey zone', clearly his reflections on the problems of judgement and representation are highly relevant to their experiences.

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.²⁴

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. The frequent misunderstandings of Levi's ideas are exemplified in the criticism levelled by the prominent Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who described Levi's 'grey zone' as 'simplistic and unfair. By speaking of the "relativity" of [the victims'] innocence, he was attenuating the guilt of the killers.'²⁵ 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

23 For specific examples of the influence of the 'grey zone' in these areas, see, respectively, Jonathan Petropoulos and John K Roth (eds) *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, New York: Berghahn 2005; Tzvetan Todorov *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollack, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1999; David Luban 'A man lost in the gray zone', *Law and History Review* 19 (1), Spring 2001; Tim Cole *Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto*, New York: Routledge 2003, 248–249; John K Roth 'In response to Hannah Holtschneider', in David Patterson and John K Roth (eds) *Fire in the Ashes: God, Evil, and the Holocaust*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 2005, 53–54; Claudia Card 'Groping through gray zones', in Claudia Card (ed) *On Feminist Ethics and Politics*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas 1999; Bryan Cheyette 'The uncertain certainty of *Schindler's List*' in Yosefa Loshitzky (ed) *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1997; Seymour M Hersh 'The gray zone', *The New Yorker* 80 (13), 24 May 2004.

24 Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*, 27.

25 Elie Wiesel *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969*, trans. Marion Wiesel, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1999, 347.

rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth'.²⁶ Accepting what Levi highlights as the inherent difficulties involved 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'.²⁷

A key tenet of Levi's reflection on 'privileged' Jews is that they should not be judged for their ambiguous behaviour. He writes, somewhat paradoxically, 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.'²⁸ 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'.²⁹ Likewise, Levi clearly states that the same *impotentia judicandi* 'paralyses' us when considering Rumkowski.³⁰ While we should not condemn Rumkowski, Levi writes that we cannot 'absolve him on the moral plane' either. In short, Levi holds that certain Jews *in extremis* should be neither condemned nor absolved for their actions; that negative and positive moral evaluations of their behaviour should be withheld. Paradoxically, however, Levi himself cannot abstain from judging those he argues should not be judged, as I have argued elsewhere.³¹ Indeed, it might be argued that while judgement of 'privileged' Jews may be impossible, it is also inevitable.³²

Significantly, Levi's characterisation of 'privileged' Jews seems to exclude any individuals involved in active 'resistance'. Writing of those 'privileged' political prisoners who were also 'members of secret defence organizations', Levi states that these functionaries 'were not at all, or only apparently, collaborators, but on the contrary were camouflaged

26 Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*, 33.

27 Dominick LaCapra *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2001, 210, n. 18.

28 Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*, 29.

29 *Ibid*, 41, 43.

30 *Ibid*, 43.

31 See Adam Brown 'The trauma of "choiceless choices": the paradox of judgement in Primo Levi's "Grey Zone"', in Matthew Sharpe, Murray Noonan and Jason Freddi (eds) *Trauma, Historicity, Philosophy*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press 2007, 121-140; Adam Brown 'Traumatic memory and holocaust testimony: passing judgement in representations of Chaim Rumkowski', *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique* 15, June 2008, 128-144.

32 '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.

opponents'.³³ Furthermore, Levi writes with understandable praise of the 12th squad of *Sonderkommandos*, 'which in October 1944 organised the only desperate attempt at revolt in the history of the Auschwitz Lager'. He contrasts this 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 ... to immediate death'.³⁴ It would seem, therefore, that, for Levi, 'resistance' and moral 'compromise' are incompatible, binary opposites; however, as I argued earlier, the experiences and behaviour of prisoner doctors were considerably more complicated than this. As Levi's reflections seem to preclude any individuals involved in resistance, this raises the issue of how prisoner doctors are to be perceived and depicted.

While a large historiographical debate focuses on the behaviour of the Jewish councils,³⁵ Levi's essay on the 'grey zone' is one of the few discussions that directly address the complex problems of judgement and representation in relation to 'privileged' Jews, with most studies avoiding or marginalising the important distinction. This is particularly the case with regards to historical treatments of prisoner doctors. For example, volumes focusing on the atrocities committed by the notorious Dr Mengele frequently reflect the dubious nature of clear-cut moral judgements of some of his victims. Nyzizli is simply (and simplistically) described as a 'collaborator of Mengele' in one historical text,³⁶ while his testimony is used elsewhere to stand in for the perspective of the Nazi doctor, implying a problematic parallel between persecutor and persecuted.³⁷ On the other hand, Martin Gilbert's large volume, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (1985), quotes large passages – sometimes up to one page in length – from the memoirs of Nyzizli and Perl without providing any of the

33 Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*, 30.

34 Ibid, 41–42.

35 See, in particular, the highly influential – and roundly criticised – judgements of philosopher Hannah Arendt and historian Raul Hilberg. See *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, revised edn, New York: Penguin 1994 (1965); Raul Hilberg *The Destruction of the European Jews*, revised edn, vol 3, New York: Holmes & Meier 1985. For further discussion of Hilberg, see Adam Brown "'Privileged" Jews, Holocaust representation and the "limits" of judgement: the case of Raul Hilberg', in Evan Smith (ed) *Europe's Expansions and Contractions: Proceedings of the XVIIth Biennial Conference of the Australasian Association of European Historians (Adelaide, July 2009)*, Unley: Australian Humanities Press 2010, 63–86. For a comprehensive critique of Arendt's judgement of 'privileged' Jews, see Jacob 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.

36 Gerald Astor *The 'Last' Nazi: The Life and Times of Dr Joseph Mengele*, London: Sphere 1985, 3.

37 Gerald L Posner and John Ware *Mengele: The Complete Story*, New York: Futura 1987, 19. For a less condemnatory representation of Nyzizli's behaviour, see Lifton *The Nazi Doctors*, 370.

context of their controversial positions of 'privilege'. Nonetheless, a careful consideration of survivor testimony provided by former prisoner doctors contributes much to an attempt to understand the ethical dilemmas they faced, as an analysis of Perl's memoir demonstrates.

Perl was born in Sighet, Hungary, in the year 1900. Following the Nazi occupation of the country in March 1944, Perl was held for two weeks in the town's Ghetto. A well-known obstetrician and gynaecologist, Perl was ordered to establish a Ghetto hospital with a maternity ward, while her husband, also a doctor, became President of the Ghetto's Jewish Council.³⁸ Perl was soon deported along with her family to Auschwitz. Only Perl would survive. Following an excruciating eight-day journey in a cattle car, Perl was one of the few in her transport to be admitted into the Women's Camp at Birkenau, where she lived within sight of the crematoria chimneys. The rest, including most of her family, were sent straight to the gas chambers. In a place where cruel beatings were commonplace, rations were insufficient to sustain life, and one public latrine served 30 000 women (and only during certain times of the day), Perl suffered numerous degradations and humiliations; however, when she became a prisoner doctor in the camp 'hospital', she gained access to 'privileges' that arguably contributed to her survival.

Perl writes in her memoir of endless hours of treating sick and dying patients, and faking blood tests in order to protect prisoners suffering from typhoid, who, if discovered, would have been killed immediately.³⁹ At night, without medical equipment and in unavoidably unhygienic conditions, Perl secretly performed abortions or delivered babies only to kill them shortly afterwards. Estimates vary, though it is possible that Perl saved 1000 women in this way.⁴⁰ However, sometimes she provided fetuses for Mengele's medical experiments, exemplifying the ambiguous nature of her actions. As the Russian army drew near, Perl was transferred to a labour camp in Hamburg, followed by the notorious Bergen Belsen, where she was liberated. Perl was the subject of much controversy when she emigrated to the United States in 1946. She underwent an intense interrogation by members of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, who accused her of collaborating with the Nazis. Eventually receiving

38 Myrna Goldenberg 'Gisella Perl', in S Lillian Kremer (ed) *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and their Work*, New York & London: Routledge 2003, 931–933.

39 Perl *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, 94.

40 One estimate suggests that Perl saved over 3000 women. See Hans Meyerhoff 'A parable of simple humanity', *Partisan Review*, September 1948, 966–971. Given the relatively short time Perl was incarcerated in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the number may in fact have been substantially fewer than 1000.

a work permit, Perl worked as a gynaecologist in New York and, several years later, relocated to Israel. Perl died on 24 November, 1988.

Perl's memoir, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, was published in 1948. It provides a detailed account of her experiences from the period just prior to her incarceration in the Birkenau death camp, through to the months immediately following her liberation (before she emigrated). Perl's memoir is an often disconcerting mixture of tremendous guilt, self-justification, naivety, modesty and glorified self-praise. Towards the end of her memoir, Perl writes mournfully of 'the pregnant mothers and newborn babies who had to die in the flames ... my tragic efforts to save their lives and ... the inhuman suffering it cost me to prevent birth, the greatest, most beautiful miracle in the world'.⁴¹ Words like 'heroism' and 'courage' do not do justice to situations like these. Although Perl's actions can and should be construed as 'resistance', it is evident that in circumstances such as these, the term takes on additional connotations – or perhaps loses some. While one is likely repelled by Perl's description of strangling a baby boy and 'bur[y]ing his body under a mountain of corpses waiting to be cremated',⁴² one should not condemn Perl for acting in the way that she did. Here the twin problems of judgements and representation highlighted by Levi are particularly acute. Levi emphasises that while the 'privileged' prisoners of the 'grey zone' should be acknowledged and meditated on, moral judgements (positive or negative) should be suspended – although the question of whether or not this is at all possible remains doubtful.

Robert Rozett writes that firsthand accounts by Jews cannot clarify the Nazis' motives or plans, but 'can only teach us about the effect of the horror on the individual victims and the experiences of the victims facing the horror'.⁴³ This acknowledgement of the importance of perspective does not detract from the critical value of survivor accounts; however, an awareness of the subjective nature of diaries, memoirs and oral/video testimonies does raise important ethical questions when considering how survivors represent the situations, experiences and behaviour of 'privileged' Jews – whether this be their own behaviour or that of others they had observed.⁴⁴ Most Jews who held 'privileged' positions in the camps and ghettos of

41 Perl *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, 177–178.

42 Ibid, 84.

43 Robert Rozett *Approaching the Holocaust: Texts and Contexts*, London & Portland: Vallentine Mitchell 2005, 100–101.

44 Analyses of the representation and judgement of 'privileged' Jews in videotestimonies can be found in Adam Brown 'Confronting "choiceless choices" in Holocaust videotestimonies: judgement, "privileged" Jews, and the role of the interviewer', in Mick Broderick and Antonio Troverso (eds) *Interrogating Trauma: Collective Suffering in Global Arts and Media*, London: Routledge 2011, 79–90; 'Trauma and Holocaust videotestimony:

Eastern Europe did not survive. The vast majority of the victims whom Levi includes in the 'grey zone' have left no account for posterity, and of those 'privileged' Jews who have, they themselves struggle to explain the traumatic ethical dilemmas they were confronted with.

In the extreme situations the Nazis created, ethical norms no longer existed. As Levi wrote in his first memoir, 'Survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world – apart from powerful and direct interventions of fortune – was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints'.⁴⁵ Prisoners were faced with extreme dehumanisation and death. Yet the moral 'compromises' that 'privileged' Jews such as Perl were forced to make must nonetheless be acknowledged, lest an understanding of the complexities of Holocaust experiences remain elusive. At one point in her memoir, Perl displays a hint of naivety about the implications of her actions when cooperating with Mengele's experiments:

I shall always remember that day. I had been ordered to interrupt a two-month-old pregnancy and conserve the embryo in formaline. It was a difficult operation without instruments, without anesthetics, but Fate was merciful to me and I succeeded in bringing out the eight-week-old fetus in one piece. It was a beautiful specimen and I hurried to put it into the formaline jar to show it to Dr. Mengerle [sic] later.⁴⁶

How one is to approach this problematic passage is a complex issue, though it is evident that the extreme circumstances of Perl and other 'privileged' Jews pose considerable problems for 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'.⁴⁷ Many scholars have regarded the Holocaust as a 'limit event', challenging attempts to understand and depict it through testimonies, historical writing, fictional narratives and other forms. Addressing the twin necessities of maintaining the memory of the past through representation and avoiding its distortion, the seminal theorist Saul Friedlander argues that 'there are limits to representation *which should*

the intersection of history, memory and judgment in the interview process', *Traumatology: An International Journal – Special Issue: History, Memory, and Trauma* 15 (4), December 2011, 44–54.

45 Levi *If This is a Man*, 93.

46 Perl *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, 119–120.

47 Claire Colebrook *Ethics and Representation: From Kant to Post-structuralism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1999, 2.

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.⁴⁸ The experiences of Perl and other ‘privileged’ Jews, which defy ultimate understanding, exacerbate this problem even more; hence the problematic highlighted in Levi’s writing on the ‘grey zone’ may be put forward as a ‘limit’ of judgement.

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, the abandonment of a Manichean perspective and any related ‘heroic’ discourse is essential to highlight the complexity of the situations that ‘privileged’ Jews faced. The extreme situations Perl confronted reveal traditional notions of ‘heroism’ to be problematic. In his literary analysis of the ‘antiheroic’ in Levi’s writings, Victor Brombert 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.’⁴⁹ There is thus a need to reject stereotypical representations of Jews as passive victims, heroic martyrs or complicit traitors. Nonetheless, avoiding black-and-white stereotypes alone does not guarantee that judgement is suspended when representing liminal figures. This emotionally and morally fraught problem is also clear in a recent attempt to represent Perl’s experiences in Joseph Sargent’s made-for-cable film, *Out of the Ashes* (2003).

Representing ‘privileged’ Jews on the screen: dramatisation and judgement

From many signs, it would seem the time has come to explore the space which separates ... the victims from the persecutors, and to do so with a lighter hand, and with a less turbid spirit than has been done, for instance, in a number of films.⁵⁰

Significantly, Levi felt compelled to reflect on the ‘grey zone’ partly – perhaps even primarily – due to his concern about historical and filmic representations that he felt ‘trivialised’ the complexity of Holocaust

48 Saul Friedlander ‘Introduction’, in Saul Friedlander (ed) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1992, 3.

49 Victor Brombert *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature, 1830–1980*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999, 8–9.

50 Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*, 25.

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 oppositions of 'friend' and 'enemy', 'good' and 'evil'.⁵¹ In a similar way to Tzvetan Todorov's more recent reflections on 'moral life' in the concentration camps, Levi's writings portray the victims as neither 'heroes' nor 'saints', and their persecutors as neither 'monsters' nor 'beasts'.⁵² As the above statement reveals, Levi was deeply sceptical of what he saw as the simplistic moral judgements communicated through the cinema in particular.

The seminal work of Holocaust film scholar, Annette Insdorf, observes that while the first two decades of Holocaust feature films focused on 'Jewish victims and Nazi villains', the 'second wave', beginning in the mid-1980s, has concentrated on resistance and rescue.⁵³ The release of Steven Spielberg's Hollywood blockbuster *Schindler's List* in 1993 only hastened this trend, with stories of Gentile saviours and Jewish fighters rushing to the screen. The representation of 'privileged' Jews within this common paradigm has important implications for how their behaviour is judged. The pervasive interest in a Manichean discourse has resulted in many filmic representations of 'privileged' Jews that condemn their 'corrupt' behaviour, which is eventually absolved by their own or others' heroism.⁵⁴

However, a number of films released in recent years veer away from 'mainstream' Holocaust productions and engage directly with the issue of 'privileged' Jews. These films can often be seen to self-consciously respond to Levi's 'grey zone' or Langer's concept of 'choiceless choices'. Implicitly rejecting Spielberg's sentimental depiction of survival as resulting from heroic acts of defiance, some filmmakers have helped establish a new trend – what I term a 'third wave' – in Holocaust film, which focuses on issues of trauma, 'guilt' and 'compromise'. Several of these films focus directly on 'privileged' Jews and engage with the problem of judgement. Among these are Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone* (2001), which responds directly to Levi's representation of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommandos*; Audrius Juzenas' German film *Ghetto* (2005), a depiction of the ethical dilemmas confronting the Jewish police in the Vilna Ghetto; and Stefan

51 Ibid, 22.

52 Tzvetan Todorov *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. A Denner and A Pollack, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1999, 262.

53 Annette Insdorf *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 3rd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, 247.

54 See Adam Brown 'Marginalising the marginal in Holocaust films: fictional representations of Jewish policemen', *Limina* 15, June 2009.

Ruzowitzky's Academy Award-winning film, *The Counterfeiters* (2007), portraying a group of 'privileged' Jews forced to produce counterfeit money for the Nazis. The 2003 film, *Out of the Ashes*, which dramatises Perl's story, is another example of this trend. While Sargent's film could at first glance be categorised as a 'resistance' film, the narrative refuses to glorify Perl's actions, and instead self-consciously works to expose and explore the position of moral 'compromise' Perl found herself in – even though it does not succeed in suspending judgement.

The film begins with Perl's arrival in the United States, where she comes under investigation by the INS after applying for citizenship. In the opening scenes, Perl is portrayed as abrupt, materialistic, elitist, arrogant and somewhat selfish, which has the effect of distancing the audience and minimising viewer identification and empathy. Christine Lahti, the actor who plays Perl, has commented: 'There are a lot of grey tones to this character ... She's got so many contradictory qualities, and for that reason ... I think she's very human.'⁵⁵ Indeed, Lahti even draws on the concept of 'choiceless choices' when discussing Perl. The film's unorthodox characterisation is a significant strategy that works to prepare the audience for what is to come. The narrative, propelled by Perl's interrogation by the immigration authorities, continuously moves between the harrowing investigation into Perl's wartime activities and flashbacks of her life before and during her incarceration in Auschwitz.

Extended flashback sequences depict the process of identification, expropriation, ghettoisation and deportation that Perl suffered, followed by the various privations of camp life. As the film proceeds, Perl's memories of Auschwitz become more traumatic and the controversial nature of her survival is made increasingly clear. This is enhanced by the filmmakers' use of cinematography and costuming, which render the flashback sequences progressively darker, drained of colour, and eliciting a sombre mood. Significantly, a friend who accompanies Perl to a session of the interrogation becomes disillusioned by what she hears, and decides not to attend any further sessions. There is therefore no clear surrogate in the film for the audience to identify with, nor a clear perspective on Perl's actions to adopt. Nonetheless, viewers continue to serve as observers of – if not participants in – the investigation until its conclusion.

In a flashback sequence set just after her arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Perl is shown volunteering to gather pregnant women for Mengele,

inadvertently sending them to their deaths. Back in the present day, she is asked by an interrogator whether she assisted Mengele in his medical experiments, and she stumbles for words. Another flashback later in the film reveals that she was enlisted to induce the birth of twins for Mengele to experiment on. This sequence is followed by images of a distraught Perl in the present day guiltily reciting the Hippocratic Oath. Throughout the film, the interrogation and simultaneous flashbacks fluctuate between showing Perl's virtuous and more ambiguous behaviour. For example, after a former Auschwitz prisoner testifies to the INS panel that Perl had saved her life at great risk to her own, Perl is shown prioritising patients who could offer payment in some form, which Perl had denied earlier in the film. The structure of the film therefore takes the form of a kind of debate.

At the end of the investigation, a distressed Perl delivers a tearful monologue, which serves as a closing statement to her interrogators and sums up the key issues that the film has been preoccupied with:

Everything changed when I was deported to Auschwitz and then began working there as a doctor. You know about some of the things that I did there for the pregnant women. But yes, I also sent, unknowingly, many women to their deaths within a day of my arrival. And yes, some of the things that I was forced to do there, they were not honourable. So you are right: I have blood on my hands. I only did what I had to do to survive. Those of us who did not survive, perhaps in some ways they are the best of us.

This strongly parallels an oft-quoted line from Levi's final book containing his essay on the 'grey zone'. Addressing the problematic intersection of survival, 'privilege' and human behaviour *in extremis*, Levi writes:

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.⁵⁶

The film closes on an optimistic note, showing the panel approving Perl's request for citizenship and ending with images of Perl delivering another survivor's baby. While the film's closure resorts to perhaps undue sentimentality and hints at redemption, it makes the problematic nature of Perl's survival clear. Echoing this, the film's director comments in an interview (Special Features on DVD) that the Holocaust is:

56 Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*, 63.

a very complex horror. It's not just one black-and-white, easily identifiable, easily exploitable, and easily understandable hell on earth ... [L]ike so much in life, it contains many complex layers of human behaviour. The need to survive is very paramount in the life of Gisella Perl ... I hope [the film] says, if nothing else, that life is a little more complex than simplistic black-and-white.

Sargent's reflection invokes ideas very similar to Levi's 'grey zone'; nonetheless, while ethical Manicheanisms are arguably avoided throughout the film and the narrative constructs a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of 'privileged' Jews than is commonly seen, a process of judgement clearly permeates the drama. Indeed, Sargent has explicitly stated that the film examines whether or not Perl was a 'collaborator'.

Conclusion

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.⁵⁷

The necessity of continued efforts to represent and comprehend the magnitude of the Holocaust and the extreme experiences it entailed counterbalances any claim that the event is fundamentally impossible to come to grips with. Drawing on Levi's aversion to Manichean allegories and 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.⁵⁸

While the issue of 'privileged' Jews has widely been considered taboo and no study has focused specifically on the place of moral judgement in representations of their experiences, it is clear that Levi's effort to

57 Lawrence L Langer 'The dilemma of choice in the deathcamps', in Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E Myers (eds) *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1988, 121.

58 Shoshana Felman 'After the apocalypse: Paul de Man and the fall to silence', in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds) *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York: Routledge 1992, 123 (author's emphasis).

impress on his readers the precariousness of addressing such a complex and sensitive issue is of crucial importance.

In popular culture in particular, but also in other areas, the glorification of victims and demonisation of perpetrators arguably remains the dominant paradigm of reflecting on the Holocaust. Given the immense suffering of the victims and the invariably enigmatic nature of perpetrator and collaborator behaviour, this is, of course, understandable, but a Manichean framework is also dangerous. As Langer has written, 'Choiceless choices are perversions of power and will; they proclaim the impotence of the victim, who contaminates his [sic] future by the very compulsion to survive in which his oppressors seek to drown his moral nature'.⁵⁹ The horrific situational factors influencing victim behaviour must take precedence over moral judgement. In relation to the experiences of 'privileged' Jews, it is here that instances of extreme trauma pose perhaps insurmountable obstacles to representation, and expose the fragility of human judgement when confronted with a morally liminal situation.

While, in Perl's words, 'no one will ever know' what she had to endure in order to save other women from the Nazi gas chambers, meditating on the dilemmas faced by Perl and other victims like her serves to underline the importance of Levi's declaration that the 'grey zone' is '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'.⁶⁰ Significantly, Perl's own characterisation of the desperate struggle for survival in Birkenau parallels Levi's writing. It is perhaps fitting to end with this passage from Perl's memoir, which reinforces the presence of traumatic memories left in the wake of Nazi Germany's destruction of European Jewry – although one might, nonetheless, hesitate before adopting the judgements that Perl's choice of words seems to recommend:

There was an unbearable tension in the air which turned the prisoners against one another and bred hostility instead of solidarity ... The Nazi method of completely dehumanising us before throwing us into the fire worked beautifully. Only a very few, the strongest, the cleanest, the noblest were able to retain a semblance of human dignity ... By stealing bread, shoes, water, you stole a life for yourself, even if it was at the expense of other lives. Only the strong, the cruel, the merciless survived.⁶¹

59 Langer *Versions of Survival*, 146.

60 Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*, 25–26.

61 Perl *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, 36–37, 76.

About the author

Dr Adam Brown is a Lecturer in Media, Communication and Public Relations at Deakin University, Melbourne. His PhD thesis, 'Representation and Judgement: 'Privileged' Jews in Holocaust Writing and Film', which focused on historical and cultural representations of the Holocaust across different media, received the 2009 Isi Leibler Prize for the best contribution to advancing knowledge of racial, religious or ethnic prejudice in any time or place. Adam also works as a volunteer at the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne, where he has initiated the digitisation of the Centre's survivor videotestimony collection and co-launched the JHC Film Club. He recently co-authored the study, *Communication, New Media and Everyday Life* (2011), and is currently working on research in the areas of children's digital television culture, new media in museums, and Holocaust film.

Correspondence to Adam Brown: adam.brown@deakin.edu.au