

**Traumatic Memory and Holocaust Testimony: Passing Judgement  
in Representations of Chaim Rumkowski**

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*To testify is always, metaphorically, to take the witness stand, or to take the position of the witness insofar as the narrative account of the witness is at once engaged in an appeal and bound by an oath.<sup>1</sup>*

A fundamental characteristic of the Holocaust was the unresolvable, arguably unprecedented, ethical dilemmas that confronted many of its Jewish victims. The traumatic experiences of Jews imprisoned within concentration camps and ghettos not only included physical and emotional torment, but also frequently consisted of being coerced into making decisions – what Lawrence Langer terms “choiceless choices” – at the expense of

fellow inmates.<sup>2</sup> In dealing with situations such as these, contemporary understandings and representations face great obstacles, especially when it comes to the question of passing moral judgement. Even survivor testimonies are challenged by this problem. Alan Mintz writes that Jewish “collaboration” was “rife and the object of deep and implacable hatred on the part of Jews who were its victims.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as the above epigraph suggests, judgement may itself be considered an inherent part of the testimonial act.

In 1986, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi published a highly influential essay on this very theme. He called it “The Grey Zone.”<sup>4</sup> Levi’s essay addresses the highly complex and sensitive issue of prisoners who, in response to dehumanising and life-threatening persecution, “compromised” themselves by “collaborating,” to borrow the commonly used terms, with their Nazi captors. A key example Levi uses is Chaim Rumkowski, the controversial *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) official of the Lodz ghetto. Responding to the simplifying effects of the judgements he sees contained within popular histories and films, Levi argues that one should not pass judgment on Jews who found themselves in extreme situations. His concept of the “grey zone” holds that certain “privileged” Jews, including Rumkowski, should not be condemned or absolved for their behaviour *in extremis*, suggesting that representations of these victims require sustained ambiguity. However, even Levi himself struggles to withhold judgement when discussing Rumkowski.

This paper will explore the theoretical tensions within Levi’s concept of the “grey zone,” and expose what may be termed a paradox of judgment – the perceived need to withhold judgement and the simultaneous compulsion to pass it. To illustrate this, Levi’s paradigmatic analysis of Rumkowski will be compared with the treatment of the Jewish leader in more recent survivor testimonies. It will be shown that in spite of Levi’s call to abstain from judgement, representations of Rumkowski often condemn him for his behaviour, revealing the volatile nature of traumatic memory. Nonetheless, some testimonies also exhibit self-reflexive moments that appear to question the possibility of moral evaluation, and perhaps move towards an acknowledgement of the ambiguity that Levi recommends. To varying extents, the paradox of judgement at the heart of the “grey zone” is visible in all of the testimonies examined.

### ***I. Primo Levi's "Grey Zone" and the Problem of Judgement and Representation***

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 (29).

When one is faced with a catastrophic event such as the Holocaust, moral judgement is widely perceived to be essential, if not obligatory. However, when confronted with the extreme circumstances of so-called "privileged" Jews under Nazi persecution, it may be impossible to pass judgement on them. "Impossibility" here does not infer that one is literally unable to pass judgement on "privileged" Jews – far from it, as the following analysis will reveal. Instead, the "impossibility" of judgement refers to the perceived invalidity or inappropriateness of all moral evaluation, an *impotentia iudicandi*. This is the problem that Levi's essay on the "grey zone" engages with. While he maintains that the perpetrators of the Holocaust must be judged for their actions, he warns that judgments of their victims under certain circumstances should be withheld.

"The Grey Zone" is a crucial part of Levi's engagement with his Auschwitz experience, and is arguably the most influential essay on the Holocaust ever written, having been appropriated, often uncritically, in the fields of Holocaust Studies, philosophy, law, history, theology, feminism and popular culture.<sup>5</sup> The recent feature film entitled *The Grey Zone* (Lions Gate, 2001) is also inspired by Levi's essay. The concept of the "grey zone" is essentially a metaphor for moral ambiguity, a conceptual realm that Levi characterises as having "ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge" (27). Levi's meditation on the "grey zone" was partly motivated by the many representations which he felt trivialised the Holocaust. He singles out popular history, the history taught in schools, and feature films as particularly predisposed to the simplifying trend he identifies, the "Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities," and resorts to the black and white binary opposition(s) of "friend" and "enemy," "good" and "evil" (22).

The concept of the "grey zone" is important as it destabilises clear-cut distinctions, such as those noted above, and warns against hasty moral judgement, or, in some cases, calls for it to be withheld entirely. For these reasons, an acknowledgement of the "grey zone" complicates representation, which Levi shows to be strongly related to judgement. Commenting on

the complexity of the camp experience and the human need or desire for “simplification” early in his essay, Levi writes:

The network of human relationships inside the *Lagers* [camps] was not simple: it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors. In anyone who today reads (or writes) the history of the *Lager* is evident the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to repeat Christ’s gesture on Judgement Day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates (23).

Here, the notion that simplification results from passing moral judgement in and through representation is clear. Indeed, Levi opens his essay by stressing the prominent – even necessary – place of simplification in human affairs: “What we commonly mean by ‘understand’ coincides with ‘simplify’: without profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions” (22). To put the problem Levi evokes briefly, understanding requires representation, which involves moral judgement, resulting in simplification. While Levi focuses primarily on Auschwitz, his detailed case study of Jewish leader Chaim Rumkowski suggests the associated problems of judgement and representation apply more widely to the ghettos as well.

Levi’s essay focuses primarily on those prisoners who inhabited positions as *Kapos* (chiefs) of labour squads, members of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommandos* forced to work the extermination machinery, and Rumkowski. Levi stresses that when confronted by the difficult issue of Jewish “collaboration,” moral judgment would be better entrusted “to those who found themselves in similar circumstances, and had the possibility to test on themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion” (28-9). However, survivors of the Holocaust who could confidently claim that they faced a similar situation to Rumkowski are few, if any. In any case, Levi’s essay itself creates the impression at times that the obstacles to judging these “privileged” Jews apply not only to those who did not experience the camps and ghettos, but also to those who did. In the case of the Jewish *Sonderkommandos* at least, Levi is explicit: “I repeat: I believe that no one is authorised to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not live through it” (42). This suggests that survivor testimony may also be a potential source of unwarranted judgements. Indeed, in the chapter preceding “The Grey Zone,” Levi meditates on what he calls the “marvellous but fallacious instrument” of memory. Reflecting on the bearing this has on judgement, Levi writes that judges themselves know very well how “it almost never happens that two eyewitness-

nesses of the same event describe it in the same way and with the same words, even if the event is recent and neither of them has a personal interest in distorting it" (11). He goes on to write that the extreme situations of the Holocaust complicate matters even more.

Much has been written on the actions of Rumkowski and the Jewish Councils in general, however no substantial attention has been given to the role of moral judgement in survivor testimonies.<sup>6</sup> There is also an ever-expanding literature on the problem of "representing the unrepresentable," or, in the phrasing of the seminal collection of essays edited by Saul Friedlander, the "limits of representation."<sup>7</sup> In a sense, the problem of judgement in survivor testimony (or any other representation, for that matter) may be approached as one such "limit." Robert Rozett writes that firsthand accounts of 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."<sup>8</sup> This acknowledgement of perspective does not detract from the crucial importance of survivor accounts, however an awareness of the subjective nature of diaries, memoirs and oral testimonies does raise important ethical questions when considering how survivors represent the situations, experiences and behaviour of victims other than themselves. Most Jews who held leadership positions in the ghettos of Eastern Europe did not survive, and the diary of Warsaw *Judenrat* official Adam Czerniakow, is one of few testimonies that have filtered down to us, albeit posthumously.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of the victims who Levi includes in "The Grey Zone" have not left an account for posterity, Rumkowski included.

Merging the generic boundaries of survivor account and philosophical reflection, Levi tentatively takes it upon himself to testify to the experiences and behaviour of "privileged" Jews. At the same time, he warns against any moral judgement of them, drawing himself into a paradoxical situation. In the case of the *Sonderkommandos*, Levi declares that "our need and ability to judge falters," stressing that we should "meditate on the story of the 'crematorium ravens' with pity and rigour, but that a judgement of them be suspended" (41, 43). Likewise, Levi clearly states that the same *impotentia judicandi* "paralyses" us when considering Rumkowski's leadership of the Lodz ghetto. While we should not condemn Rumkowski, he writes that we cannot "absolve him on the moral plane" either (43, 49). In short, Levi holds that certain Jews *in extremis* should not be condemned or absolved for their actions, suggesting that representations of these victims require some form of sustained ambiguity. Nevertheless, the separation of representation and judgement is far from simple, if not impossible. Although a moral judgement of "privileged" Jews may be illegitimate, representations of such

individuals in survivor testimony reveal that it is also impossible *not* to judge them. Indeed, even Levi himself cannot avoid judging those he argues should not be judged. While his use of the Italian word *collaborazione* does not evoke the negative connotations often associated with its English translation, Levi's judgement of "privileged" Jews is evident in various ways throughout his essay, as evidenced in his representation of the Jewish *Sonderkommandos*, discussed elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the paradox of judgement is exemplified in Levi's representation of Rumkowski. Paradoxically, it would seem, the "grey zone" warns against judgement but at the same time requires it.

## ***II. Representing Rumkowski: "King of the Jews"***

Levi concludes his essay on the "grey zone" with a detailed discussion of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877-1944), the elderly, failed Jewish industrialist who served as the president of the Lodz ghetto from October 1939 to August 1944. Due to being located in Poland's most important manufacturing region, Lodz's financial and material value to the Nazis helped ensure it was the longest surviving of all the ghettos. However, despite only being surrounded by barbed wire and board fences, the Lodz ghetto has been described as "more hermetically sealed off than the walled Warsaw Ghetto."<sup>11</sup> Facing severe food shortages, the ghetto's peak population of 750,000 was continuously whittled away by starvation, disease and deportations. By maintaining the levels of production required by the Nazis, the Jewish community's officials believed that even as the extermination of Jews was well under way (although the time at which this became clear to Jewish leaders is difficult to evaluate), at least a small number could be saved. This seems to be the theory on which Rumkowski's actions were based, and he was not unique among *Judenrat* leaders in thinking this. Rumkowski was appointed *Älteste der Juden* ("Elder of the Jews") in late 1939. The fact that all other members of the Jewish Council were executed and replaced soon after, and that Rumkowski himself later died in Auschwitz, demonstrates the precariousness of such a "privileged" position.

Rumkowski oversaw the running of the ghetto until its liquidation just several months before the war's end. It has been hypothesised that without the Soviet army's controversial decision to delay its advance into Poland by halting at the Vistula River, little more than 100 kilometres from Lodz, up to 80,000 Jews may have been saved and Rumkowski may even have been remembered as a hero.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, for various reasons, Rumkowski has arguably become the most despised "privileged" Jew in all survivor tes-

timony. Even Jacob Robinson, who vigorously defended the *Judenräte* against Hannah Arendt's polemics, holds that "Rumkowski's behaviour is open to criticism."<sup>13</sup> Although Levi's negative judgements of Rumkowski are usually (though not always) more subtle than others', they are still clearly evident throughout "The Grey Zone."

A key aspect of the paradox of judgement in Levi's essay is the simultaneous characterisation of the "grey zone" as indecipherable realm and moral spectrum. While Levi invariably treats the "grey zone" metaphorically, the concept also possesses a spatial element, with the word "zone" connoting a physical area that is cut off. In light of Levi's warning against judgement in the case of "privileged" Jews, the term "grey zone" suggests an indecipherable realm of ambiguity, in which pre-existing moral frameworks do not apply. As Levi writes early in his essay: "The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limits" (23). However, at various points throughout Levi's essay, the "grey zone" also gives the impression of constituting a moral spectrum, along which its inhabitants can be situated. Expanding the "grey zone" to incorporate more than only victims in the camps and ghettos, Levi writes at one point that "within [the 'grey zone'] must be catalogued, *with different nuances of quality and weight*, Quisling in Norway, the Vichy government in France, the Judenrat in Warsaw, the Saló Republic in Italy, right down to the Ukrainian and Baltic mercenaries employed elsewhere for the filthiest tasks" (27-8, emphasis added). Here, Levi implies that the *Judenräte*, which includes Rumkowski, may be compared with collaborators whose level of coercion was of an entirely different kind, if coercion existed at all (which in some cases it did not). Indeed, the fact that the collaborationist Vichy regime in France's unoccupied zone was arguably motivated by strong anti-Semitism and often acted in anticipation of German orders, would seem to disqualify any comparability with the forced cooperation of Jewish leaders.<sup>14</sup>

Levi's interest in Rumkowski was piqued long before he wrote *The Drowned and the Saved*. Indeed, the analysis he provides here is almost identical to an earlier attempt to come to grips with the Jewish leader in his "Story of a Coin," which began as a newspaper article and was eventually published in 1981 in his collection of short stories, *Moments of Reprieve*.<sup>15</sup> The fact Levi had previously written only about settings and situations he had witnessed or experienced directly is indicative of his personal compulsion to explore Rumkowski's leadership of the Lodz ghetto. While Levi is not, at least consciously, prepared to condemn Rumkowski, he writes that his apparently "natural" will to power "does not exonerate him from his responsibilities," declaring that:

If he had survived his own tragedy, and the tragedy of the ghetto which he contaminated, superimposing on it his histrionic image, no tribunal would have absolved him, nor certainly can we absolve him on the moral plane. But there are extenuating circumstances: an infernal order such as National Socialism was, exercises a frightful power of corruption, against which it is difficult to guard oneself ... To resist it a truly solid moral armature is needed, and the one available to Chaim Rumkowski, the Lodz merchant, together with his entire generation, was fragile (49-50).

While this passage highlights the inefficacy of legal institutions and moral faculties in judging “privileged” Jews, Levi’s argument that Rumkowski should not be judged is contradicted by his suggestion that the Jewish leader had “contaminated” the ghetto, a statement which distracts one from the extreme coercion that he and other *Judenrat* officials experienced. Having already mentioned the production of ghetto currency, stamps and songs that Rumkowski had dedicated to himself, Levi masks the judgement behind his comment that his subject forced “his histrionic image” on the ghetto’s inhabitants. It would also seem paradoxical to critique the moral framework of individuals living in an extreme situation that is itself beyond evaluation according to contemporary moral standards.

Conceding that Rumkowski’s position was “intrinsically frightful,” Levi writes that “the four years of his presidency or, more precisely, his dictatorship, were an astonishing tangle of megalomaniacal dream, barbaric vitality, and real diplomatic and organizational ability” (45). While Levi portrays Rumkowski as demonstrating, at times, a genuine concern for many of his subordinates, he also characterises him as possessing an arrogant sense of self-importance that proved detrimental to many of the ghetto’s Jews. His representation of the much-reviled Jewish leader is replete with negative descriptors, such as “authoritarian,” “renegade” and “accomplice” (44, 46). Levi also links Rumkowski with the moral standards (or lack thereof) that he perceives in the *Kapos*, describing him as a “corrupt satrap” who displays the “identification with the oppressor” he had condemned so strongly earlier in his essay (46, 32). Indeed, Levi becomes more explicit towards the end of “The Grey Zone,” not only drawing a parallel between Rumkowski and “the *Kapos* and Lager functionaries,” but also “the small hierarchs who serve a regime to whose misdeeds they are willingly blind; of the subordinates who sign everything because a signature costs little; of those who shake their heads but acquiesce; those who say, ‘If I did not do it, someone else worse than I would’” (50). By generalising Rumkowski’s “complicity” in this way and making reference to the postwar excuse common among perpetrators, Levi verges on blurring the distinction between victim and perse-



cutor, a distinction he had gone to great lengths to underline several pages earlier.

Confidently claiming that Rumkowski “passionately loved authority,” Levi positions him as a self-proclaimed “King of the Jews” who “rode through the streets of his minuscule kingdom, streets crowded with beggars and postulants” (45). This reflects the fact Levi was heavily influenced by Leslie Epstein’s controversial novel, *King of the Jews*, which was also initially to be the title of his “Story of a Coin.” By turns scandalous, compassionate and perverse, the protagonist of Epstein’s fictionalised narrative develops an almost mythological aspect, fluctuating between dedicated representative and egotistical dictator of the ghetto.<sup>16</sup> While Levi’s representation also shifts between positive and negative evaluations of Rumkowski’s character, the manner in which he passes judgement on the Jewish leader is evident in the way he frequently prefaces his critical comments about him. When Levi writes that his subject “*must have* progressively convinced himself that he was a Messiah,” “*it is probable* that Rumkowski thought of himself not as a servant but as a Lord,” and “*he must have* taken his own authority seriously” (46, emphasis added), one might question the validity of making such assumptions under the extremely complex circumstances at issue. In any case, Levi’s rhetoric clearly displays the moral evaluation he otherwise seeks to withhold, and it is evident that he expects his reader will adopt his judgment.

Furthermore, in the same way that Levi implies the *Kapos* and members of the *Sonderkommandos* were to some extent naturally predisposed to their positions of “privilege,”<sup>17</sup> there is a strong sense that he thinks the same of Rumkowski. After explicating the addictive and corruptive qualities of “power,” he writes: “If the interpretation of a Rumkowski intoxicated with power is valid, it must be admitted that the intoxication occurred not because of, but rather despite, the ghetto environment; that is, it is so powerful as to prevail even under conditions that would seem to be designed to extinguish all individual will” (49). Significantly, this is the first time in his essay that Levi explicitly prioritises the influence of the human predisposition to “compromise” – in this case, Rumkowski’s alleged lust for power – over the impact of external factors, namely the “choiceless choices” imposed by the Nazi regime in order to pursue their goals.

Most tellingly of all, when Levi states that Rumkowski “must be placed in this band of half-consciences,” he adds that “whether high or low it is difficult to say” (50). The imagery invoked of a “band” along which “privileged” Jews are situated returns us to the paradoxical conceptualisation of the “grey zone” as both indecipherable realm and moral spectrum. Reflecting on where Rumkowski should be positioned on this moral continuum, Levi

gestures at the impossibility of judgement through his expression of uncertainty, his acknowledgement that “it is difficult to say.” This call for sustained ambiguity is also clear in Levi’s rhetorical movement from the particular to the universal, with the end of his essay transforming into a general digression on the corruptive influence of power. Having doubted one’s ability to judge the Jewish leader, Levi states: “We are all mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours” (50). Nonetheless, Levi’s judgement is clarified in his allusion to Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, which compares Rumkowski with Angelo, the play’s devious and hypocritical villain, who uses his position of power for his own personal gain and attempts to have a man executed for a crime he himself commits.

Levi’s search for a universal “lesson” in the experiences of the ambiguous figures of the “grey zone,” who are both ostensibly beyond, but at the same time subject to, his judgement, is clear in the closing lines of his essay. Here, Levi essentially provides a self-reflexive, pessimistic extrapolation from the historically specific ethical dilemmas facing “privileged” Jews to a despairing social commentary on human nature:

Like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility: willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death and that close by the train is waiting (51).

Raniero Speelman writes that “this may be the most pregnant of Levi’s sayings and the nucleus of his philosophy. These words link the Shoah to us, just like we are already linked to the Shoah.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in placing us in the position of Rumkowski – or at the very least acknowledging the possibility that we may logically be faced with such pressures under the same circumstances – Levi makes a genuine, if unsuccessful, effort to abstain from passing judgement on the Jewish leader.

### ***III. The Persistence of Judgement: Representations of Rumkowski in Recent Survivor Testimony***

The tension between representation and judgement can also be seen in the testimonies of two survivors of the Lodz ghetto, both of whom lost their entire families during the Holocaust. One of these survivors is Abraham Biderman, who spent several years in Lodz before being incarcerated in Auschwitz and several other concentration camps. In his recent memoir entitled *The World of My Past* (1995), Biderman provides a detailed ac-

count of his firsthand experiences, but also occasionally draws on secondary sources to contextualise his memories within a broader historical framework. While he does not always reveal his sources through endnotes, it is clear that his frequent references to Rumkowski are influenced by other texts.

Biderman quotes Rumkowski's speeches and written proclamations at length, listing the boasts, threats and promises he made towards the ghetto population, and labeling him a "traitor."<sup>19</sup> Although he briefly mentions that Rumkowski was beaten by the Nazis, Biderman accuses the Jewish leader of acting like a "medieval despot" who "play[ed] poker with the devil."<sup>20</sup> He frequently contrasts Jews who accepted "privileged" positions with those he describes as "heroes without medals," the "thousands of unknown and honourable people who refused to bend or be degraded."<sup>21</sup> Even more judgmentally, and in a manner that arguably overlooks the coercion the *Judenräte* were subjected to, Biderman holds that under Rumkowski, "the Lodz ghetto functioned autonomously with German precision." Likewise, he implies a high degree of free will when he claims that Rumkowski "allowed the Germans to use him as their tool in the destruction of his people [emphasis added]."<sup>22</sup>

Later, however, in a section titled "The end of an emperor," Biderman changes his approach substantially. Contradicting his earlier assertion that Rumkowski played a "leading role" in the drama,<sup>23</sup> he acknowledges that the circumstances dictated by the Nazis meant that Rumkowski had no control over the fate of the ghetto's Jews. In the same passage, Biderman fluctuates between describing Rumkowski as a "hostage, a pawn, a tool in the hands of a most brutal monster," and emphasising what he perceives to be his lack of integrity and leadership qualities, his efficiency in following through on German demands, and his failure to refuse the "privileges" given to him.<sup>24</sup> He condemns Rumkowski's apparent acquiescence to the Nazis' demand for children as "a fatal, and unforgiveable mistake," and attributes the longevity of the ghetto solely to the Nazis' greed. Biderman dismisses all positive appraisals of Rumkowski on this point in the process, even though he admits the Jewish leader negotiated the "quota" of the ghetto's first deportation down to half its initial number.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, upon narrating Rumkowski's violent end in Auschwitz, Biderman is prompted to question his and others' ability to judge him. Describing Rumkowski as beaten half-unconscious upon arrival at the camp before being thrown straight into an open furnace by other prisoners, Biderman asks:

Was Auschwitz the place for justice? It is hard to be a hero. It is just

as difficult to be a judge. I am only a survivor, a witness telling a story the way it unfolded in front of my eyes. And my story is a testimony to all those who lived and died behind the barbed wires of the Lodz ghetto. I leave it for history to judge.<sup>26</sup>

Here, Biderman connects his testimony to the absence of a testimony by Rumkowski, one of the many who, metaphorically at least, “lived and died behind the barbed wires of the Lodz ghetto.” While negative evaluations of Rumkowski’s behaviour proliferate in Biderman’s memoir, this self-reflexive passage injects a moment of doubt into the survivor’s representation. In his final questioning of the possibility of judgement, Biderman reveals that he too is caught in the paradox of judgement evoked by Levi’s “grey zone.”

The recent testimony of Jacob Rosenberg, an award-winning writer and another survivor of the Lodz ghetto, further reinforces this. In his semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional work, *East of Time* (2005), Rosenberg constructs a mosaic of Jewish experiences in the ghetto. As he notes in the preface to his book: “The anecdotes, incidents and characters that appear throughout these pages come directly from my memories – although some names have been changed, and occasionally I have succumbed to the storyteller’s prerogative (and delight) in a measure of embellishment, not to say invention.”<sup>27</sup> This admission, like Levi’s acknowledgement of the fallibility of memory, underlines the status of testimony as re-presentation.

In the main, Rosenberg represents Rumkowski, one of the few characters in his text to be referred to in several sections, judgmentally. The narrator’s initial references to Rumkowski display familiar moral judgements, describing him as a “king” and “puppeteer” who “mimicked” the Nazi state, and “could definitely not be regarded as a disappointment to his bosses.”<sup>28</sup> A detailed description of Rumkowski’s perceived elitism, eager subservience to the Nazis, and the hatred he inspired in the ghetto follows. In the chapter titled “Give Me Your Children!”, which recounts the speech in which Rumkowski announced the order for children to be deported, the narrator negatively portrays him as an inexplicable enigma: “More than six decades later, I still keep wondering what sort of a man can bring himself to utter such words.”<sup>29</sup>

Shortly afterwards, however, in a digression on the hierarchical “pyramid” of the ghetto, of which Rumkowski inhabits the top, the narrator’s tone changes briefly, leaving the reader to contemplate the Jewish leader’s dilemma from a point of attempted empathy. Expressing his dislike of Rumkowski, the narrator nevertheless questions:

But where is the man who can state with conviction whether Rumkowski’s decisions were a product of bravery or of cowardice? His

lot was lonely, to be sure, and very far from easy. Did he have a choice? Perhaps he did, and perhaps he didn't ... And in the end, who knows how many times, during sleepless nights, this man who projected such strength and confidence shrank back in horror at the echo of his own fateful words: 'Mothers, give me your children!?'<sup>30</sup>

In a similar way to Levi and Biderman, this passage, a rupture in the narrative's critique of Rumkowski, reveals a fleeting – yet strong – degree of uncertainty, both towards the previously demonised figure and towards the capacity for moral evaluation under extreme circumstances. Although not essential to the last line, a question mark is nonetheless provided. Even so, the paradoxical tension between the impossibility and inevitability of judgement continues, as Rosenberg immediately follows this section with a vignette depicting a man's grief and subsequent suicide at having lost his wife and child to the deportations, perhaps reinvigorating his prior condemnation of Rumkowski.<sup>31</sup>

In any case, the uncertainty on the part of Rosenberg is evidently intended to be taken on by the reader, perhaps moving towards the open-ended, sustained ambiguity that Levi's "grey zone" calls for. Rosenberg's memoir raises a crucial point that cannot be easily set aside: like most "privileged" Jews, the only words about Rumkowski that we lack and can never obtain are his own. Indeed, Levi himself writes that only Rumkowski could clarify his situation "if he could speak before us, even lying, as perhaps he always lied, to himself also; he would in any case help us understand him, as every defendant helps his judge" (50). Here again, Levi's discourse still betrays his judgement of Rumkowski while simultaneously emphasising the need to withhold it. It would seem that the tension between representation and judgement in Holocaust testimony is ongoing.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Drawing on Levi's "grey zone" and stressing the collapse of former ethical frameworks based on notions of "dignity" and "freedom" in the post-Auschwitz world, contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that the knowledge that human life continues in "the most extreme degradation," knowledge that is imparted to us through survivor testimony, "now becomes the touchstone by which to judge and measure all morality and all dignity."<sup>32</sup> However, this is further complicated when judgements proceeding from the inevitable subjectivity of survivor experience and testimony are brought to bear on such controversial figures as Rumkowski, who, unlike some Jewish leaders, left no testimony of his own. To adopt legalistic ter-

minology, with survivors positioned as figures of judgement over “defendants” who have no means to account for themselves, and indeed with testimony itself an inherently judgmental act, it is clear that the representation of “privileged” Jews such as Rumkowski remains a particularly fraught issue.

When it comes to the problem of judgement and representation, the traumatic memories of survivors pose stark problems. Although a moral judgement of Jews *in extremis* may be illegitimate, as Levi’s essay on the “grey zone” suggests, representations of such individuals in survivor testimony reveal that it may also be impossible not to judge them. Reflecting the paradox of judgement evident in the concept of the “grey zone,” the representations of Rumkowski by Levi, Biderman and Rosenberg all clearly exercise moral judgement. While the self-reflexive moments of uncertainty visible in these testimonies can be seen to approach the kind of ambiguity that Levi’s “grey zone” seems to require, it is perhaps the case that such moments are overwhelmed by the judgements throughout. Not all survivor testimony condemns Rumkowski, however.

In a recent compilation of fragments of survivor testimony titled *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust* (2005), Rumkowski’s name appears several times. Stressing the dire circumstances imposed on the Lodz ghetto, Polish-Jewish survivor Roman Halter, whose testimony earlier in the book had criticised Rumkowski’s request for Jewish children, maintains that: “It is important not to accuse Rumkowski and others who were running the ghetto, but to see it now as a totality of what was imposed from Hitler and Himmler down to other SS ... I don’t really hold it against Rumkowski and the other ghetto leaders. It was terrible when he said voluntarily, ‘Please give up your children,’ but these times were abnormal, so horrendous, that one cannot rationalize in the circumstances in which we live today, how people behaved and what they did.”<sup>33</sup> Whether or not this constitutes absolving Rumkowski of wrongdoing, a judgement Levi also warned against, is open to debate. It is highly significant that this fragment is located by the editor in a section entitled “Forgiving and Forgetting”.

Earlier in the book, a fragment by Lodz survivor Michael Etkind also mentions Rumkowski, overtly refusing to judge him (although he does use the word *collaborate*). Etkind, who held a “privileged” position of a different kind as a member of the ghetto’s postal service, addresses the issue of survivors’ judgements of the Jewish leader, thus it would seem fitting to end with his words:

Some resented Rumkowski’s role in the ghetto, but many did not. Had he survived he would have been murdered after the war; as it was he was killed in Auschwitz. But indirectly, because of him, more

people survived in the Lodz ghetto (for longer) than in any other; not those he meant to survive – himself, his family and his friends - but people like myself. He did collaborate ... Those he put on the deportations list, because they were not working, hated and resented him; but the people who because of him survived, were very grateful to him ... It is *impossible* to judge.<sup>34</sup>

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), p. 204.
- <sup>2</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 72.
- <sup>3</sup> Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 184.
- <sup>4</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1988 [1986]), pp. 22-51. All in-text parenthetical references are to this book.
- <sup>5</sup> For examples 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 & Oxford: Berghahn, 2005); Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner & Abigail Pollock (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999 [1991]); David Luban, "A Man Lost in the Gray Zone," *Law and History Review*, 19.1 (Spring 2001), pp. 161-76; Doris L. Bergen, "Mourning, Mass Death, and the Gray Zone: The Ethnic Germans of Eastern Europe and the Second World War," ed. Peter Homans, in *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 171-93; John K. Roth, "In Response to Hannah Holtschneider," eds. David Patterson and John K. Roth, in *Fire in the Ashes: God, Evil, and the Holocaust* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2005), pp. 48-9; Claudia Card, "Groping through Gray Zones," ed. Claudia Card, in *On Feminist Ethics and Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), pp. 3-26; Bryan Cheyette, "The Uncertain Certainty of *Schindler's List*," ed.

- Yosefa Loshitzky, in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 226-38.
- <sup>6</sup> See, in particular, Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi Occupation* (New York: Scarborough, 1977 [1972]). For further discussion of Rumkowski, see Richard L. Rubenstein, "Gray into Black: The Case of Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski," ed. Jonathan Petropoulos & John K. Roth, in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 2005) pp. 299-310; Shmuel Huppert, "King of the Ghetto: Mordecai Haim Rumkowski, the Elder of Lodz Ghetto," ed. Livia Rothkirchen, in *Yad Vashem Studies XV* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1983), pp. 125-57.
- <sup>7</sup> Saul Friedlander ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- <sup>8</sup> Robert Rozett, *Approaching the Holocaust: Texts and Contexts* (London & Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005), pp. 100-1.
- <sup>9</sup> Raul Hilberg et al., eds., *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979).
- <sup>10</sup> Adam Brown, "The Trauma of 'Choiceless Choices': The Paradox of Judgement in Primo Levi's 'Grey Zone,'" ed. Matthew Sharpe et. al., in *Trauma, Historicity, Philosophy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), pp. 142-63.
- <sup>11</sup> Leonard Tushnet, *The Pavement of Hell* (New York: St. Martin's, 1972), p. x.
- <sup>12</sup> See Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 132; Alan Adelson and Robert Lapidés eds., *Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community under Siege* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 489.
- <sup>13</sup> 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), p. 178.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Michael R. Marrus, "Coming to Terms with Vichy," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 9.1 (Spring 1995), pp. 23-41; Paul Webster, *Pétain's Crime: The Full Story of French Collaboration in the Holocaust* (Basingstoke & Oxford: Pan, 2001 [1990]).
- <sup>15</sup> Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. Ruth Feldman (London: Abacus, 1990 [1981]), pp. 161-72.
- <sup>16</sup> Leslie Epstein, *King of the Jews* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979).
- <sup>17</sup> For further discussion, see Brown, "Trauma," pp. 155-8.
- <sup>18</sup> Raniero M. Speelman, "Primo Levi's Short Stories: A Modern Midrashim," ed. Stanislaw G. Pugliese, in *The Legacy of Primo Levi* (New York & Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 29.
- <sup>19</sup> Abraham Biderman, *The World of My Past* (Milsons Point: Vintage, 1995), pp. 20-3.
- <sup>20</sup> Biderman, *World*, pp. 25, 124, 83.



- <sup>21</sup> Biderman, *World*, p. 33.
- <sup>22</sup> Biderman, *World*, pp. 19, 20.
- <sup>23</sup> Biderman, *World*, p. 20.
- <sup>24</sup> Biderman, *World*, pp. 186-7.
- <sup>25</sup> Biderman, *World*, pp. 187-8.
- <sup>26</sup> Biderman, *World*, p. 188.
- <sup>27</sup> Jacob G. Rosenberg, *East of Time* (Blackheath: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2005), p. 9.
- <sup>28</sup> Rosenberg, *East*, pp. 123-4.
- <sup>29</sup> Rosenberg, *East*, p. 152.
- <sup>30</sup> Rosenberg, *East*, pp. 155-6.
- <sup>31</sup> Richard Freadman, *This Crazy Thing a Life: Australian Jewish Autobiography* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2007), pp. 103-4.
- <sup>32</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 2002), p. 69.
- <sup>33</sup> Lyn Smith ed., *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust* (London: Ebury, 2005), p. 333.
- <sup>34</sup> Smith, *Forgotten*, pp. 124-5.