The Grey Zone of Shame: The Drowned and the Saved

The Drowned and the Saved is a very different endeavor compared to Primo Levi's other writings about the Holocaust. Both *Survival in Ausweitz* and *The Reawakening* take place in the moment of action – in the Lager – and were written soon after the experience. By contrast, Levi wrote *The Drowned and the Saved* in the 1970's. With the additional time and some emotional distance, *The Drowned and the Saved* directly discusses the issues that were depicted in Levi's previous novels. Writes Levi, the novel contains "more considerations than memories" (Levi 35). Specifically, Levi explains the ambiguousness of morality, guilt, and shame. He calls this "the grey zone."

The grey zone appears to describe a (fittingly) broad set of actions and ideas. On the surface, the grey zone demonstrates the absence of a clearly demarcated line between good and evil. Levi feels that the "desire for simplification" (37) is justified "for the young," but this concept of true heroes and villains is a literary fantasy that cannot be realized in real life. Levi describes the moral disintegration that struck almost everyone: "life in the Lager involved a regression, leading back precisely to primitive behavior" (39).

As evidence for this transformation, one may examine the treatment of new prisoners by the established veterans. Levi writes, "Rarely was a newcomer received… as a companion-in-misfortune." Rather, "in the majority of cases, those with seniority showed irritation or even hostility… [the newcomer] was envied… derided and subjected to cruel pranks" (39). How can one reconcile these actions with the tremendous guilt that follows? Levi argues that the reaction of those in the Lager, while barbaric, was a natural human reaction given the situation. He defends, "The prisoners of the Lagers… represented an average, unselected sample of humanity" (49). Essentially, Levi makes a statistically based, scientific argument to defend the actions of the

prisoners. Since the prisoners of the Lager represented a true cross-section of humanity, it can be extrapolated that any other representative sample would have reacted the same way. Thus, "their behavior was rigidly preordained" as "the vectors and instruments of the system's guilt" (49).

The grey zone becomes cloudier when one considers the actions of the privileged prisoners. Levi's description of the kapos is drenched with resentment, "these prisoners instead of taking you by the hand, reassuring you, teaching you the way, throws himself at you, screaming in a language you do not understand, and strikes you in the face. He wants to… extinguish any spark of dignity that he has lost and you perhaps still preserve" (41). Yet, Levi concedes, "in general, [the privileged] are poor devils like ourselves" (44). Indeed, privileged prisoners were also those responsible for the most daring and successful revolts in the camp. It also should be remembered that Levi himself was a privileged prisoner for working in the chemical kommando. However, the members of the chemical kommando were never charged with harming or controlling other prisoners. But what if they had been? Would Levi have reacted the same way as the *Einsatkommandos,* who slaughtered Russian civilians under orders (31)? This inability to truly judge one's own actions, this "relative morality," is the grey zone.

How, then, can one judge the kapos? Levi seems to place the kapos perilously at the edge of the grey zone. Their actions are more deliberate, more conscious – more evil – than the other prisoners. The difference is that once given power they took it upon themselves to seek more and assert it. In doing so, many kapos began to emulate the Nazis, "power was sought by the man among the oppressed who had been contaminated by their oppressors and unconsciously strove to identify with them" (48). That places many kapos outside of the grey and the realm that the Nazis occupy – that of the truly guilty.

From the grey zone, Levi observes two phenomena that emerge: the shame of the victims, and the distortion of the memory of the perpetrators, a "falsification of reality, [a] negation of reality… to protect the conscience" (31). Though Levi advocates an understanding of this grey zone through "relative morality," that does not mean that one should refrain from judgment. For this reason, Levi does not allow the Nazi perpetrator's entry into the grey zone: "The majority of the oppressors, during or after their deeds, realized that what they were doing or had done was iniquitous… but its suffering is not enough to enroll them among the victims" (59).

Indeed, there is a line, that when crossed, is most certainly evil. But one of Levi's most crucial messages in *The Drowned and the Saved* is that the prisoners (with few exceptions) did not cross this line. Levi stresses with great urgency that "the prisoner's errors and weaknesses are not enough to rank them with their custodians." The victims of the Holocaust were human beings placed in an inhuman environment. For their actions, however bad, they should understand and reflect, and perhaps feel some shame, but not guilt. The real crime was the Holocaust in itself.