

CHAPTER TWO

The Grey Zone

Have we – we who have returned – been able to understand and make others understand our experience? 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. In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema: with this purpose in view we have built for ourselves admirable tools in the course of evolution, tools which are specifically the property of the human species – language and conceptual thought.

We also tend to simplify history; but the pattern within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single unequivocal fashion, and it may therefore happen that different historians understand and construe history in ways that are incompatible with one another. Nevertheless, perhaps for reasons that go back to our origins as social animals, the need to divide the field into ‘we’ and ‘they’ is so strong that this pattern, this bi-partition – friend-enemy – prevails over all others. Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichean tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels – we and they, Athenians and Spartans, Romans and Carthaginians. This is certainly the reason for the enormous popularity of spectator sports, such as soccer, baseball and boxing, in which the contenders are two teams or two individuals, clearly distinct and identifiable, and at the end of the match there will be vanquished and victors. If the result is a draw, the spectator

feels defrauded and disappointed: at the more or less unconscious level, he wanted winners and losers and he identified them respectively with the good guys and the bad guys, because the good must prevail, otherwise the world would be subverted.

This *desire* for simplification is justified, but the same does not always apply to simplification itself. It is a working hypothesis, useful so long as it is recognised as such and not mistaken for reality; the greater part of historical and natural phenomena is not simple, or not simple with the simplicity that we would like. Now, the network of human relationships inside the Lagers 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. The young above all demand clarity, a sharp cut; their experience of the world being meagre, they do not like ambiguity. In any case, their expectation reproduces exactly that of the newcomers to the Lagers, whether young or not; all of them, with the exception of those who had already gone through an analogous experience, expected to find a terrible but decipherable world, in conformity to that simple model which we atavistically carry within us – ‘we’ inside and the enemy outside, separated by a sharply defined geographic frontier.

Instead, the arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the ‘we’ lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us. One entered hoping at least for the solidarity of one’s companions in misfortune, but the hoped-for allies, except in special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed-off monads, and in between them a desperate

hidden and continuous struggle. This brusque revelation, which became manifest from the very first hours of imprisonment, often in the instant form of a concentric aggression on the part of those in whom one hoped to find future allies, was so harsh as to cause the immediate collapse of one's capacity to resist. For many it was lethal, indirectly or even directly: it is difficult to defend oneself against a blow for which one is not prepared.

Various aspects can be identified in this aggression. It is necessary to remember that the concentrationary system even from its origins (which coincide with the rise to power of Nazism in Germany) had the primary purpose of shattering the adversaries' capacity to resist: for the camp management, the new arrival was an adversary by definition, whatever the label attached to him might be, and he must immediately be demolished to make sure that he did not become an example or a germ of organised resistance. On this point the SS had very clear ideas and it is from this viewpoint that the entire sinister ritual there must be interpreted – varying from Lager to Lager, but basically similar – which accompanied the arrival: kicks and punches right away, often in the face; an orgy of orders screamed with true or simulated rage; complete nakedness after being stripped; the shaving off of all one's hair; the fitting out in rags. It is difficult to say whether all these details were devised by some expert or methodically perfected on the basis of experience, but they certainly were willed and not casual: it was all staged and this was quite obvious.

Nevertheless, the entry ritual, and the moral collapse which it promoted, was abetted more or less consciously by the other components of the concentrationary world: the simple prisoners and the privileged ones. It rarely happened that a newcomer was received, I won't say as a friend but at least as a companion in misfortune. In the majority of cases, those with seniority (and seniority was acquired in three or four months; the change-over was swift!) showed irritation or even hostility. The 'newcomer' (*Zugang*: one should note that in German this is an abstract, administrative term; it means 'access', 'entry') was

envied because he still seemed to have on him the smell of his home. It was an absurd envy, because in fact one suffered much more during the first days of imprisonment than later on when habituation on the one hand and experience on the other made it possible to build oneself a shelter. He was derided and subjected to cruel pranks, as happens in all communities with 'conscripts' and 'rookies', and in the initiation ceremonies of primitive peoples: and there is no doubt that life in the Lager involved a regression, leading back precisely to primitive behaviour.

It is probable that the hostility towards the *Zugang* was in substance motivated like all other forms of intolerance; that is, it consisted in an unconscious attempt to consolidate the 'we' at the expense of the 'they', to create, in short, that solidarity among the oppressed whose absence was the source of additional suffering, even though not perceived openly. Vying for prestige also came into play, which in our civilisation seems to be an irrepressible need: the despised crowd of seniors was prone to recognise in the new arrival a target on which to vent its humiliation, to find compensation at his expense, to build for itself and at his expense a figure of a lower rank on whom to discharge the burden of the offences received from above.

As for the privileged prisoners, the situation was more complex, and also more important: in my opinion, it is in fact fundamental. It is naïve, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism was, sanctifies its victims: on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them similar to itself, and this all the more when they are available, blank, and lack a political or moral armature.

From many signs, it would seem the time has come to explore the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) 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. Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is; it is studded with obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously), whom it 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, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory.

The privileged prisoners were a minority within the Lager population, but they represent a potent majority among survivors; in fact, even if one does not take into account the hard labour, the beatings, the cold, the illnesses, it must be remembered that the food ration was decisively insufficient even for the most frugal prisoner: the physiological reserves of the organism being consumed in two or three months, death by hunger, or by diseases induced by hunger, was the prisoner's normal destiny. This could be avoided only with additional food, and to obtain it a large or small privilege was necessary; in other words, a way, granted or conquered, astute or violent, licit or illicit, to lift oneself above the norm.

Now, one mustn't forget that the greater part of the memories of those who came back, told or written, begin in this way: the collision with the concentrationary reality coincides with the unforeseen and uncomprehended aggression on the part of a new and strange enemy, the functionary-prisoner, who 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 tame you, extinguish in you the spark of dignity that you perhaps still preserve and he has lost. But trouble is in store for you if this dignity drives you to react: this is an unwritten but iron law. *Zurückschlagen*, answering blows with blows, is an intolerable transgression that can only occur to the mind of a 'newcomer'. Anyone who commits it must be made an example of: other functionaries rush to the defence of the threatened order and the culprit is beaten with rage and method until he's tamed or dead. Privilege, by definition, defends and protects privilege. I remember now that the local, Yiddish and Polish term to indicate privilege was '*protekcja*', which is pronounced '*protekczia*' and is of obvious Italian and Latin origin. I was told the story of an Italian 'newcomer', a

Partisan, flung into a work Lager with the label of political prisoner when his strength was still at its height. He had been beaten when the soup was being distributed and had dared to shove the distributor-functionary: the latter's colleagues rushed to his help, and the culprit was made an example of by being drowned, his head held down in the soup tub.

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

The grey zone of '*protekcja*' and collaboration is born from multiple roots. In the first place, the more the area of power is restricted, the more it needs external auxiliaries; the Nazism of the final years could not do without them, determined as it was to maintain its order within subjugated Europe and feed the front lines of the war bled white by its opponents' growing military resistance. It was indispensable to draw from the occupied countries not only labour but also forces of order, delegates and administrators of the German power which was by now committed elsewhere to the point of exhaustion. Within this area 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 (never in combat) and the *Sonderkommandos*, about which we will have more to say.

But collaborators who originate in the adversary camp, ex-enemies, are untrustworthy by definition: they betrayed once and they can betray again. It is not enough to relegate them to marginal tasks; the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible. They will thus have established with their instigators the bond of complicity and will no longer be able to turn back. This way of proceeding is well known to criminal associations of all times and places, has always been practised by the Mafia, and is also the only thing that can explain the otherwise indecipherable excesses of Italian terrorism in the 1970s.

In the second place, and in contrast with a certain hagiographic and rhetorical stylisation, the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness to collaborate with the power. This availability is also variegated by infinite nuances and motivations: terror, ideological seduction, servile imitation of the victor, myopic desire for any power whatsoever, even though ridiculously circumscribed in space and time, cowardice, and finally lucid calculation aimed at eluding the imposed orders and order. All these motives, singly or combined with one another, have been at work in originating this grey zone, whose components were held together by the wish to preserve and consolidate their privilege *vis-à-vis* those without privilege.

Before discussing separately the motives that impelled some prisoners to collaborate to a varying extent with the Lager authorities, it is necessary however to declare that before such human cases it is imprudent to hasten to issue a moral judgement. It must be clear that the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state, the concurrent guilt on the part of the individual big and small collaborators (never likeable, never transparent!) is always difficult to evaluate. It is a judgement that we would like to entrust only 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. Manzoni knew this quite well: 'Provocateurs, oppressors, all those who in some way injure others, are guilty, not only of the evil they commit, but also of the perversion into which they lead the spirit of the offended.' 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.

If it were up to me, if I were forced to judge, I would light-heartedly absolve all those whose concurrence in the guilt was minimal and for whom coercion was of the highest degree. Around us, prisoners without rank, swarmed low-ranking functionaries. They formed a picturesque fauna: sweepers, kettle washers, night-watchmen, bed smoothers (who exploited to their minuscule advantage the German fixation about bunks made up flat and square), checkers of lice and scabies, messengers, interpreters, assistants' assistants. In general, they were poor devils like ourselves, who worked full time like everyone else, but who, for an extra half-litre of soup, were willing to carry out these and other 'tertiary' functions: innocuous, sometimes useful, often invented out of nothing. They were rarely violent, but they tended to develop a typically corporative mentality, and energetically defended their 'job' against anyone from below or above who might covet it. Their privilege, which at any rate entailed supplementary hardships and efforts, gained them very little and did not spare them from the discipline and suffering of everyone else; their hope for life was substantially the same as that of the unprivileged. They were coarse and arrogant, but they were not regarded as enemies.

Judgement becomes more delicate and varied for those who occupied commanding positions: the chiefs (*Kapos*: the German term derives directly from the Italian *capo*, and the truncated pronunciation, introduced by the French prisoners, spread only many years later, popularised by Pontecorvo's movie of the same name and preferred in Italy precisely because of its differentiating value) of the labour squads, the barracks chiefs, the clerks, all the way to the world (whose existence at that

time I did not even suspect) of the prisoners who performed diverse, at times most delicate duties in the camps' administrative offices, the Political Section (actually a section of the Gestapo), the Labour Service, and the punishment cells. Some of these, thanks to skill or luck, had access to the most secret information of the respective Lagers and, like Herman Langbein in Auschwitz, Eugen Kogan in Buchenwald, and Hans Marsalek in Mauthausen, later became their historians. One does not know whether to admire more their personal courage or the cunning which enabled them concretely to help their companions in many ways, by attentively studying the individual SS officers with whom they had contact, and sensing who among them might be corrupted, who dissuaded from the crueller decisions, who blackmailed, who deceived, who frightened by the prospect of a *redde rationem* at the war's end. Some of them, the three mentioned above, for example, were also members of secret defence organisations, and therefore the power they wielded thanks to their positions was counterbalanced by the extreme danger they ran, inasmuch as they were both 'resistors' and the depositories of secrets.

The functionaries described were not at all, or only apparently, collaborators, but on the contrary were camouflaged opponents. Not so the greater part of the other persons with positions of command, who prove to be human specimens that range from the mediocre to the execrable. Rather than wearing one down, power corrupts; all the more intensely did their power corrupt, since it had a peculiar nature.

Power exists in all the varieties of the human social organisation, more or less controlled, usurped, conferred from above or recognised from below, assigned by merit, corporate solidarity, blood, or position: it is likely that a certain degree of man's domination over man is inscribed in our genetic patrimony as gregarious animals. It is not proved that power is intrinsically harmful to the collectivity. But the power of which the functionaries of whom we are speaking disposed, even if they were low-ranking, such as the *Kapos* of the work squads, was, in substance, unlimited; or, more accurately put, a lower

limit was imposed on their violence, in the sense that they were punished or deposed if they did not prove to be sufficiently harsh, but there was no upper limit. In other words, they were free to commit the worst atrocities on their subjects as punishment for any transgressions, or even without any motive whatsoever. Until the end of 1943 it was not unusual for a prisoner to be beaten to death by a *Kapo*, without the latter having to fear any sanctions. Only later on, when the need for labour became more acute, a number of limitations were introduced: the mistreatment the *Kapos* were allowed to inflict on the prisoners must not permanently reduce their working ability; but by now the malpractice was established and the regulation was not always respected.

Thus inside the Lager, on a smaller scale but with amplified characteristics, was reproduced the hierarchical structure of the totalitarian state, in which all power is invested from above and control from below is almost impossible. But this 'almost' is important: there never existed a state that was really 'totalitarian' from this point of view. Some form of reaction, a corrective of the total tyranny has never been lacking, not even in the Third Reich or Stalin's Soviet Union: in both cases, public opinion, the magistrature, the foreign press, the churches, the feeling for justice and humanity which ten or twenty years of tyranny were not enough to eradicate, have to a greater or lesser extent acted as a brake. Only in the Lager was the restraint from below non-existent, and the power of these small satraps was absolute. It is understandable that power of such magnitude overwhelmingly attracted the human type who is greedy for power: that even individuals with moderate instincts aspired to it, seduced by the many material advantages of the position, and that the latter became fatally intoxicated by the power at their disposal.

Who became a *Kapo*? It is once again necessary to distinguish. In the first place, those to whom this possibility was offered, that is, those individuals in whom the Lager commander or his delegates (who were often good psychologists) discerned a potential collaborator: common criminals, taken

from prisons, to whom a career as torturers offered an excellent alternative to detention; political prisoners broken by five or ten years of sufferings, or, in any case, morally debilitated; later on, also Jews who saw in the particle of authority that was being offered them the only possibility of escaping the 'final solution'. But many, as we mentioned, spontaneously aspired to power. It was sought by sadists, certainly not numerous but very much feared, because for them the position of privilege coincided with the possibility of inflicting suffering and humiliation on those below them. It was sought by the frustrated, and this too is a feature which in the microcosm of the Lager reproduces the macrocosm of totalitarian society: in both, without regard to ability and merit, power is generously granted to those willing to pay homage to hierarchic authority, thus attaining an otherwise unattainable social elevation. Finally, it is sought by the many among the oppressed who were contaminated by the oppressors and unconsciously strove to identify with them.

This mimesis, this identification or imitation, or exchange of roles between oppressor and victim, has provoked much discussion. True and invented, disturbing and banal, acute and stupid things have been said: it is not virgin terrain; on the contrary it is a badly ploughed field, trampled and torn up. The film director, Liliana Cavani, who was asked to express briefly the meaning of a beautiful and false film of hers, declared: 'We are all victims or murderers, and we accept these roles voluntarily. Only Sade and Dostoevsky have really understood this'; she also said she believed 'that in every environment, in every relationship, there is a victim-executioner dynamism more or less clearly expressed and generally lived on an unconscious level.'

I am not an expert of the unconscious and the mind's depths, but I do know that few people are experts in this sphere, and that these few are the most cautious; I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers

existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth. I know that in the Lager, and more generally on the human stage, everything happens, and that therefore the single example proves little. Having said all this quite clearly, and reaffirmed that confusing the two roles means wanting to becloud our need for justice at its foundation, a few more remarks should be made.

It remains true that in the Lager and outside, there exist grey, ambiguous persons, ready to compromise. The extreme pressure of the Lager tends to increase their ranks; they are the rightful owners of a quota of guilt (which grows apace with their freedom of choice), and besides this they are the vectors and instruments of the system's guilt. It remains true that the majority of the oppressors, during or (more often) after their deeds, realised that what they were doing or had done was iniquitous, or perhaps experienced doubts or discomfort, or were even punished; but this suffering is not enough to enrol them among the victims. By the same token, the prisoners' errors and weaknesses are not enough to rank them with their custodians: the prisoners of the Lagers, hundreds of thousands of persons of all social classes, from almost all the countries of Europe, represented an average, unselected sample of humanity. Even if one did not want to take into account the infernal environment into which they had been abruptly flung, it is illogical to demand of them, and it is rhetorical and false to maintain that they all and always followed, the behaviour expected of saints and stoic philosophers. In reality, in the enormous majority of cases, their behaviour was rigidly pre-ordained. In the space of a few weeks or months the deprivations to which they were subjected led them to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold, fatigue and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero; among these, very few survived the test and this thanks to the coming together of many improbable

events: in short, they were saved by luck, and there is not much sense in trying to find something common to all their destinies, beyond perhaps their initial good health.

An extreme case of collaboration is represented by the *Sonderkommandos* of Auschwitz and the other extermination camps. Here one hesitates to speak of privilege: whoever belonged to this group was privileged only to the extent that – but at what cost – he had enough to eat for a few months, certainly not because he could be envied. With this duly vague definition, ‘Special Squad’, the SS referred to the group of prisoners who were entrusted with the running of the crematoria. It was their task to maintain order among the new arrivals (often completely unaware of the destiny awaiting them) who must be sent into the gas chambers; to extract the corpses from the chambers, pull gold teeth from jaws, cut the women’s hair, sort and classify clothes, shoes, and the contents of the luggage; transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens; extract and eliminate the ashes. The Special Squad in Auschwitz numbered, depending on the moment, from seven hundred to one thousand active members.

These Special Squads did not escape everyone else’s fate; on the contrary, the SS exerted the greatest diligence to prevent any man who had been part of it from surviving and telling. Twelve squads succeeded each other in Auschwitz; each one remained operative for a few months, then it was suppressed, each time with a different trick to head off possible resistance, and as its initiation the next squad burnt the corpses of its predecessors. In October 1944 the last squad rebelled against the SS, blew up one of the crematoria, and was exterminated in an unequal battle which I will discuss later on. The survivors of the Special Squad were therefore very few, having escaped death because of some unforeseeable whim of fate. None of them, after the Liberation, has spoken willingly, and no one speaks willingly about their frightful condition. The information we have about these Squads comes from the meagre depositions of survivors; from the admissions of their ‘in-

stigators’ tried in various courts; from hints contained in the depositions of German or Polish ‘civilians’ who, by chance, came into contact with the squads; and lastly, from diary pages which were written feverishly for future memory and buried with extreme care near the crematoria in Auschwitz by some of the squads’ members. All these sources are in agreement, and yet we found it difficult, almost impossible, to form an image for ourselves of how these men lived day by day, saw themselves, accepted their condition.

At first, the SS chose them from among the prisoners already registered in the Lager, and it has been testified that the choice was not made only on the basis of physical strength but also by a deep study of the physiognomies. In a few rare cases, the enrolment took place as a punishment. Later on, it was considered preferable to pick out the candidates directly at the railroad platform, on the arrival of each convoy: the SS ‘psychologists’ noticed that the recruitment was easier if one drew them from among those desperate, disoriented people, exhausted from the journey, bereft of resistance, at the crucial moment of stepping off the train, when every newly arrived person truly felt on the threshold of the darkness and terror of an unearthly space.

The Special Squads were largely made up of Jews. In a certain sense, this is not surprising since the Lager’s main purpose was to destroy Jews and, beginning in 1943, the population in Auschwitz was composed of ninety to ninety-five per cent Jews. From another point of view, one is stunned by this paroxysm of perfidiousness and hatred: it must be the Jews who put the Jews into the ovens, it must be shown that the Jews, the sub-race, the sub-men, bow to any and all humiliation, even to destroying themselves. On the other hand, it is proved that not all the SS gladly accepted massacre as a daily task; delegating part of the work to the victims themselves, and indeed the most filthy part, was meant to alleviate (and probably did) a few consciences here and there.

Obviously, it would be iniquitous to attribute such acquiescence to some specifically Jewish peculiarity: members

of the Special Squads were also non-Jewish, German and Polish prisoners, although with the 'more dignified' duties of *Kapos*; and also Russian prisoners-of-war, whom the Nazis considered only by one degree superior to the Jews. They were few, because the Russians in Auschwitz were few (they were, for the greater part, exterminated before, immediately after being captured, machine-gunned on the edge of enormous common graves): but they did not behave in a different way from the Jews.

The Special Squads, since they were bearers of a horrendous secret, were kept rigorously apart from the other prisoners and the outside world. Nevertheless, as is known to anyone who had gone through similar experiences, no barrier is ever without a flaw: information, possibly incomplete or distorted, has a tremendous power of penetration, and something always does filter through. Concerning these squads, vague and mangled rumours already circulated among us during our imprisonment, and were confirmed afterwards by the other sources mentioned before, but the intrinsic horror of this human condition has imposed a sort of reserve on all the testimony; so even today it is difficult to conjure up an image of 'what it meant' to be forced to exercise this trade for months. It has been testified that a large amount of alcohol was put at the disposal of those wretches and that they were in a permanent state of complete debasement and prostration. One of them declared: 'Doing this work, one either goes crazy the first day or gets accustomed to it.' Another, though: 'Certainly, I could have killed myself or got myself killed; but I wanted to survive, to avenge myself and bear witness. You mustn't think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy.'

It is evident that these things which were said, and the innumerable others which were probably said by them and among them but did not reach us, cannot be taken literally. From men who have known such extreme destitution one cannot expect a deposition in the juridical sense of the term, but something that is at once a lament, a curse, an expiation, and an attempt to justify and rehabilitate themselves. One

should expect a liberating outburst instead of a Medusa-faced truth.

Conceiving and organising the squads was National Socialism's most demonic crime. Behind the pragmatic aspect (to economise on able men, impose on others the most atrocious tasks), other more subtle aspects can be perceived. This institution represented an attempt to shift on to others – specifically the victims – the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence. It is neither easy nor agreeable to dredge this abyss of viciousness, and yet I think it must be done, because what it was possible to perpetrate yesterday can be attempted again tomorrow, can overwhelm ourselves and our children. One is tempted to turn away with a grimace and close one's mind: this is a temptation one must resist. In fact, the existence of the squads had a meaning, contained a message: 'We, the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we are; if we so wish and we do so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours.'

Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian physician, was one of the very few survivors of the last Special Squad in Auschwitz. He was a renowned anatomical pathologist, expert in autopsies and the chief doctor of the Birkenau SS whose services Mengele – who died a few years ago, escaping justice – had secured; he had given him special treatment and considered him almost as a colleague. Nyiszli was supposed to devote himself in particular to the study of twins: in fact, Birkenau was the only place in the world where it was possible to study the corpses of twins killed at the same moment. Alongside this particular task of his, to which, it should be said in passing, it does not appear he strenuously objected, Nyiszli was also the attending physician of the squad, with which he lived in close contact. Well, he recounts an episode that seems significant to me.

The SS, as I have already said, carefully chose from the Lagers or the arriving convoys the candidates for the squads,

and did not hesitate to eliminate on the spot anyone who refused or seemed unsuitable for their duties. The SS treated the newly engaged members with the same contemptuous and detached attitude that they were accustomed to show towards all prisoners and Jews in particular: it had been inculcated in them that these were despicable beings, enemies of Germany, and therefore not entitled to life; and in the most favourable instance, they should be compelled to work until they died of exhaustion. But this is not how they behaved with the veterans of the squad: in them, they recognised, to some extent, colleagues, by now as inhuman as themselves, hitched to the same cart, bound together by the foul link of imposed complicity. So, Nyiszli tells how during a 'work' pause he attended a soccer game between the SS and the SK (*Sonderkommando*), that is to say, between a group representing the SS on guard at the crematorium and a group representing the Special Squad. Other men of the SS and the rest of the squad are present at the game; they take sides, bet, applaud, urge the players on as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green.

Nothing of this kind ever took place, nor would it have been conceivable, with other categories of prisoners; but with them, with the 'crematorium ravens', the SS could enter the field on an equal footing, or almost. Behind this armistice one hears Satanic laughter: it is consummated, we have succeeded, you are no longer the other race, the anti-race, the prime enemy of the millennial Reich: you are no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people, dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother. Come, we can play together.

Nyiszli describes another episode that deserves to be meditated upon. In the gas chamber have been jammed together and murdered the components of a recently arrived convoy and the squad is performing its horrendous everyday work, sorting out the tangle of corpses, washing them with

hoses and transporting them to the crematorium, but on the floor they find a young woman who is still alive. The event is exceptional, unique; perhaps the human bodies formed a barrier around her, sequestered a pocket of air that remained breathable. The men are perplexed; death is their trade at all hours, death is a habit because, precisely, 'one either goes crazy the first day or gets accustomed to it', but this woman is alive. They hide her, warm her, bring her beef broth, question her: the girl is sixteen years old, she cannot orient herself in space or time, does not know where she is, has gone through, without understanding it, the sequence of the sealed train, the brutal preliminary selection, the stripping, the entry into the chamber from which no one had ever come out alive. She has not understood, but she has seen; therefore she must die, and the men of the squad know it just as they know that they too must die for the same reason. But these slaves, debased by alcohol and the daily slaughter, are transformed; they no longer have before them the anonymous mass, the flood of frightened, stunned people coming off the boxcars: they have a person.

One cannot help but think of the 'unusual respect' and the hesitation of the 'foul Monatto' when faced by the individual case, faced by the child Cecilia killed by the plague whom, in Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed*, the mother refuses to let be flung on the cart together with the heaped-up corpses. Occurrences like this astonish because they conflict with the image we have of man in harmony with himself, coherent, monolithic; and they should not astonish because that is not how man is. Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic; and for all that, compassion itself eludes logic. There is no proportion between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which the pity is aroused: a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows. Perhaps it is necessary that it can be so; if we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live. Perhaps the dreadful gift of pity for the

many is granted only to saints; to the Monatti, to the members of the Special Squad, and to all of us there remains in the best of cases, only the sporadic pity addressed to the single individual, the *Mitmensch*, the co-man: the human being of flesh and blood standing before us, within the reach of our providentially myopic senses.

A doctor is called, and he revives the girl with an injection: yes, the gas has not had its effect, she will be able to survive, but where and how? Just then Muhsfeld arrives; he is one of the SS men attached to the death installations. The doctor calls him to one side and presents the case to him. Muhsfeld hesitates, then he decides: no, the girl must die; if she were older, it would be a different matter, she would have more sense, perhaps she could be convinced to keep quiet about what has happened to her, but she's only sixteen: she can't be trusted. And yet, he does not kill her with his own hands; he calls one of his underlings to eliminate her with a blow to the nape of the neck. Now, this man Muhsfeld was not a compassionate person; his daily ration of slaughter was studded with arbitrary and capricious acts, marked by his inventions of refined cruelty. He was tried in 1947 in Cracow, sentenced to death and hanged and this was right; but not even he was a monolith. If he had lived in a different environment and epoch, it is likely that he would have behaved like any other common man.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* Grushenka tells the fable of the little onion. A vicious old woman dies and goes to hell, but her guardian angel, squeezing his memory, recalls that she once, only once, gave a beggar the gift of a little onion she had dug up from her garden: he holds the little onion out to her, and the old woman grasps it and is lifted out of the flames of hell. This fable has always struck me as revolting: what human monster did not throughout his life make the gift of a little onion, if not to others, to his children, his wife, his dog? That single, immediately erased instant of pity is certainly not enough to absolve Muhsfeld. It is enough, however, to place him too, though at its extreme boundary, within the grey band,

that zone of ambiguity which irradiates around regimes based on terror and obsequiousness.

It is not difficult to judge Muhsfeld, and I do not believe that the tribunal which sentenced him had any doubts; on the other hand, in contrast to this, our need and our ability to judge falters when confronted by the Special Squads. Questions immediately arise, convulsed questions for which it is an arduous task to find an answer that will reassure us about man's nature. Why did they accept that task? Why didn't they rebel? Why didn't they prefer death?

To a certain extent, the facts available to us permit us to attempt to answer. Not all did accept; some did rebel, knowing they would die. Concerning at least one case we have precise information: a group of four hundred Jews from Corfu, who in July 1944 had been included in the squad, refused without exception to do the work and was immediately killed by gas. There has remained the memory of various individual mutinies, all immediately punished by an atrocious death (Filip Müller, one of the very few survivors of the squads, tells of a companion of his whom the SS pushed into the oven alive), and many cases of suicide at the moment of recruitment, or immediately after. Finally, it must be remembered that it was precisely the Special Squad which in October 1944 organised the only desperate attempt at revolt in the history of the Auschwitz Lager, which we have already mentioned.

The information about this exploit which has come down to us is neither complete nor without contradictions. It is known that the insurgents (the personnel of two of the five Auschwitz-Birkenau crematoria), poorly armed and without contacts with the Polish Partisans outside the Lager and the clandestine defence organisation inside the Lager, blew up crematorium number three and engaged the SS in battle. The battle was soon over; a number of the insurgents managed to cut the barbed wire and escape to the outside but were captured soon afterwards. Not one of them survived; approximately four hundred and fifty were killed immediately

by the SS; among the latter, three were killed and twelve wounded.

Those whom we know about, the miserable manual labourers of the slaughter, are therefore the others, those who from one shift to the next preferred a few more weeks of life (what a life!) to immediate death, but who in no instance induced themselves, or were induced, to kill with their own hands. 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. I would invite anyone who dares pass judgement to carry out upon himself, with sincerity, a conceptual experiment: let him imagine, if he can, that he has lived for months or years in a ghetto, tormented by chronic hunger, fatigue, promiscuity and humiliation; that he has seen die around him, one by one, his beloved; that he is cut off from the world, unable to receive or transmit news; that, finally, he is loaded on to a train, eighty or a hundred persons to a boxcar; that he travels towards the unknown, blindly, for sleepless days and nights; and that he is at last flung inside the walls of an indecipherable inferno. This, it seems to me, is the true *Befehlnotstand*, the 'state of compulsion following an order': not the one systematically and impudently invoked by the Nazis dragged to judgement, and later on (but in their footsteps) by the war criminals of many other countries. The former is a rigid either/or, immediate obedience or death; the latter is an internal fact at the centre of power and could have been resolved (actually often was resolved) by some manoeuvre, some slow-down in career, moderate punishment or, in the worst of cases, the objector's transfer to the front.

The experiment I have proposed is not pleasant; Vercors tried to describe it in his story *Les armes de la Nuit* (Albin Michel, Paris, 1953), in which he speaks of 'the death of the soul', and which reread today seems to me intolerably infected by aestheticism and literary lechery. But it is doubtless true that it deals with the death of the soul. Now, nobody can know for how long and under what trials his soul can resist

before yielding or breaking. Every human being possesses a reserve of strength whose extent is unknown to him: it can be large, small, or non-existent, and only extreme adversity makes it possible to evaluate it. Even without having recourse to the extreme case of the Special Squads, it often happens to us who have returned that when we describe our vicissitudes, our interlocutor will say: 'In your place I would not have lasted for a single day.' This statement does not have a precise meaning: one is never in another's place. Each individual is so complex an object that there is no point in trying to foresee his behaviour, all the more so in extreme situations; and neither is it possible to foresee one's own behaviour. Therefore, I ask that we meditate on the story of 'the crematorium ravens' with pity and rigour, but that a judgement of them be suspended.

The same *impotentia judicandi* paralyses us when confronted by the Rumkowski case. The story of Chaim Rumkowski is not exactly a Lager story, although it reaches its conclusion in the Lager: it is a ghetto story, but so eloquent on the fundamental theme of human ambiguity fatally provoked by oppression that I would say it fits our discourse only too well. I repeat it here, even though I have already told it elsewhere.* On my return from Auschwitz I found in my pocket a curious coin of light alloy, which I have saved to this day. It is scratched and corroded; on one side it has the Hebrew star (the 'shield of David'), the date 1943, and the word *getto*; on the other side it has the inscription *Quittung über 10 Mark* and *Der Älteste der Juden in Litzmannstadt*, that is, respectively, 'Receipt for ten marks' and 'The elder of the Jews in Litzmannstadt': in short, it was a coin for internal use in a ghetto. For many years I forgot about its existence, and then, around 1974, I was able to reconstruct its story, which is fascinating and sinister.

In honour of a certain General Litzmann who had defeated

* In *Moments of Reprieve* (Michael Joseph, London, 1986).

the Russians during the First World War, the Nazis had rebaptised the Polish city of Lodz with the name of Litzmannstadt. During the final months of 1944, the last survivors of the Lodz ghetto were deported to Auschwitz: I probably found that by now useless coin on the ground in the Lager.

In 1939 Lodz had 750,000 inhabitants and was the most industrialised Polish city, the most 'modern' and the ugliest: it made its living from the textile industry, like Manchester and Biella, and it was conditioned by the presence of a myriad of small and large factories, which were mostly antiquated even then. As in all cities of a certain importance in occupied Eastern Europe, the Nazis hastened to set up a ghetto in it, reinstating, aggravated by their modern ferocity, the regime of the medieval and Counter-Reformation ghettos. The Lodz ghetto, begun as early as February 1940, was first in order of time, and after that of Warsaw second in the number of inhabitants: it grew to more than 160,000 Jews and was disbanded only in the autumn of 1944. So it was the longest lived of the Nazi ghettos, and this must be attributed to two reasons: its economic importance and the perplexing personality of its president.

His name was Chaim Rumkowski. Formerly a failed small industrialist, after varied travels and uneven fortunes he had settled in Lodz in 1917. In 1940 he was almost sixty and a widower without children; he enjoyed a certain esteem, and was known as the director of Jewish charities and as an energetic, uncultivated and authoritarian man. The position of President (or Elder) of a ghetto was intrinsically frightful, but it was a position, it constituted social recognition, raised one a step up the ladder and conferred rights and privileges, that is, authority: and Rumkowski passionately loved authority. How he happened to obtain the investiture is not known: perhaps it was simply a hoax in the sinister Nazi style (Rumkowski was, or seemed to be, a fool with an air of respectability – in short, the ideal dupe); perhaps he himself had intrigued to be chosen, so strong in him must have been the will to power.

It is proved that the four years of his presidency or, more exactly, his dictatorship, were an astonishing tangle of megalomaniac dream, barbaric vitality, and real diplomatic and organisational skill. He soon came to see himself in the role of absolute but enlightened monarch, and he was certainly encouraged along this path by his German masters who, true enough, played with him, but appreciated his talents as a good administrator and man of order. He obtained from them the authorisation to mint money, both metallic (that coin of mine) and on watermarked paper which was officially supplied him. This currency was used to pay the worn-out workers in the ghettos; they could spend it in the ghetto stores to acquire their food rations, which on the average amounted to 800 calories a day. (Let me mention in passing that at least 2,000 calories are needed to survive in a condition of total repose.)

From these famished citizens of his, Rumkowski aspired to obtain not only obedience and respect but also love: in this respect, modern dictatorships differ from the ancient ones. Since he disposed of an army of excellent artists and craftsmen, ready to perform at his slightest hint in exchange for a quarter-loaf of bread, he gave orders to design and print stamps bearing his effigy, with his snow-white hair and beard haloed by the light of Hope and Faith. He had a carriage drawn by a skeleton nag and in it he rode through the streets of his minuscule kingdom, streets crowded with beggars and postulants. He had a regal mantle, and surrounded himself with a court of flatterers and henchmen; he had his courtier-poets compose hymns in which 'his firm and powerful hands' were celebrated, and the peace and order which, thanks to him, reigned in the ghetto. He ordered that the children in the nefarious schools, devastated daily by epidemics, malnutrition and German raids, should be given the assignment to write essays in praise 'of our beloved and providential President'. Like all autocrats, he hastened to organise an efficient police force, ostensibly to maintain order, but in fact to protect his own person and impose his discipline. It was composed of 600 guards armed with clubs and an unspecified number of spies. He delivered

many speeches, some of which have been preserved for us and whose style is unmistakable: he had adopted the oratorical technique of Mussolini and Hitler, the style of inspired recitation, pseudo-colloquy with the crowd, the creation of consent through subjugation and plaudit. Perhaps this imitation of his was deliberate; perhaps, instead, it was unconscious identification with the model of the 'necessary hero' who at the time dominated Europe and was sung by d'Annunzio; but it is more likely that his attitude sprang from his condition as a small tyrant, impotent with those above him and omnipotent with those below him. The man who has throne and sceptre, who is not afraid of being contradicted or derided, speaks like this.

And yet his figure was more complex than it may appear thus far. Rumkowski was not only a renegade and an accomplice; to some extent, besides convincing others, he must have progressively convinced himself that he *was* a Messiah, a saviour of his people, whose welfare, at least at intervals, he must certainly have desired. One must benefit in order to feel beneficent, and feeling beneficent is gratifying even for a corrupt satrap. Paradoxically, his identification with the oppressor alternates, or goes hand in hand, with an identification with the oppressed, because, as Thomas Mann says, man is a mixed-up creature; and he becomes all the more confused, we might add, the more he is subjected to tensions: at that point he evades our judgement, just as a compass goes wild at the magnetic pole.

Even though he was constantly despised and derided by the Germans, it is probable that Rumkowski thought of himself not as a servant but as a Lord. He must have taken his own authority seriously: when the Gestapo, without warning, seized *his* councilmen, he came courageously to their rescue, exposing himself to jeers and slaps which he knew how to endure with dignity. On other occasions, he tried to bargain with the Germans who kept exacting more and more cloth from Lodz and from him ever more numerous contingents of useless mouths (children, old and sick people) to send to the gas chamber in Treblinka and, later on, Auschwitz. The very

harshness with which he hastened to repress signs of insubordination on the part of his subjects (there existed in Lodz, as in other ghettos, nuclei of bold political resistance, with Zionist, Bundist, or Communist roots) did not originate so much in servility towards the Germans, as in *lèse-majesté*, indignation over the outrage inflicted on his regal person.

In September 1944, as the Russian front approached, the Nazis initiated the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto. Men and women by the tens of thousands were deported to Auschwitz, *anus mundi*, ultimate drainage site of the German universe; worn out as they were, they were all eliminated almost immediately. About a thousand men remained in the ghetto, to dismantle the machinery of the factories and cancel the traces of the slaughter: they were liberated by the Red Army shortly afterwards, and it is to them that we owe the information recorded here.

About Chaim Rumkowski's final fate two versions exist, as though the ambiguity under whose sign he lived was protracted to envelop his death. According to the first version, in the course of the ghetto's liquidation, he supposedly tried to oppose the deportation of his brother, from whom he did not want to be separated. A German officer then, it is said, proposed he should leave voluntarily with his brother, and he is supposed to have accepted. Another version claims instead that Rumkowski's rescue was attempted by Hans Biebow, another figure drenched in duplicity.

This shady German industrialist was the functionary responsible for the ghetto's administration and at the same time its exclusive contractor: hence his was a delicate position, because the textile factories in Lodz worked for the armed forces. Biebow was not a ferocious beast; he was not interested in creating useless suffering or punishing the Jews for the sin of being Jewish, but he was interested in profiting from his contracts, in both legitimate and other ways. The torment in the ghetto touched him, but only indirectly; he wanted the slave workers to work, and therefore he did not want them to

die of hunger: his moral sense ended there. In reality, he was the true master of the ghetto, and he was linked to Rumkowski by that buyer-supplier relationship which often becomes a crude friendship. Biebow, a small jackal too cynical to take race demonology seriously, would have liked to put off forever the dismantling of the ghetto, which, for him, was an excellent business deal, and to preserve Rumkowski from deportation, on whose complicity he relied. Here one sees how often a realist is objectively better than a theoretician. But the theoreticians of the SS thought otherwise, and they were the stronger. They were *grundlich* radicals: get rid of the ghetto and get rid of Rumkowski.

Unable to deal with the matter otherwise, Biebow, who had good connections, handed Rumkowski a letter addressed to the Lager of his destination, and guaranteed that it would protect him and assure him special treatment. Rumkowski supposedly asked and obtained from Biebow the right to travel to Auschwitz – he and his family – with the decorum becoming his rank, that is, in a special car, attached to the end of a convoy of freight cars packed with deportees without privileges: there was only one fate for Jews in German hands, whether they were cowards or heroes, humble or proud. Neither the letter nor the special carriage were able to save Chaim Rumkowski, the king of the Jews, from the gas chamber.

A story like this is not self-enclosed. It is pregnant, full of significance, asks more questions than it answers, sums up in itself the entire theme of the grey zone and leaves one dangling. It shouts and clamours to be understood, because in it one perceives a symbol, as in dreams and the signs of heaven.

Who is Rumkowski? He is not a monster, neither is he a common man; yet many around us are like him. The failures that preceded his 'career' are significant: few are the men who draw moral strength from failure. It seems to me that in his story it is possible to recognise in an exemplary form the almost physical necessity which causes the ill-defined area of ambi-

guity and compromise to be born from political coercion. At the foot of every absolute throne, men such as Rumkowski crowd in order to grasp their small portion of power. It is a recurrent spectacle. We remember the deadly struggles during the last months of the Second World War in Hitler's court and among the ministers of Mussolini's Republic of Salò; grey men, blind first and criminal later, frenziedly dividing among themselves the tatters of an iniquitous and moribund authority.

Power is like a drug: the need for either is unknown to anyone who has not tried them, but after the initiation, which (as for Rumkowski) can be fortuitous, the dependency and need for ever larger doses is born; also born is the denial of reality and the return to childish dreams of omnipotence. 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. In fact, in him as in his more famous models, the syndrome produced by protracted and undisputed power is clearly visible: a distorted view of the world, dogmatic arrogance, need for adulation, convulsive clinging to the levers of command, and contempt for the law.

All this does not exonerate Rumkowski from his responsibilities. That a Rumkowski should have emerged from Lodz's affliction is painful and distressing; 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. It degrades its victims and makes them similar to itself, because it needs both great and small complicities. To resist it a truly solid moral armature is needed, and the one available to Chaim Rumkowski, the Lodz mer-

chant, together with his entire generation, was fragile. But how strong is ours, the Europeans of today? How would each of us behave if driven by necessity and at the same time lured by seduction?

Rumkowski's story is the sorry, disquieting story of the *Kapos* and Lager functionaries; 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.'

Rumkowski, a symbolic and compendary figure, must be placed in this band of half-consciences. Whether high or low it is difficult to say: only he could clarify this 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, even though he does not want to, even if he lies, because man's capacity to play a role is not unlimited.

But all this is not enough to explain the sense of urgency and threat that emanates from this story. Perhaps its meaning is vaster. We are all mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours, it is our second nature, we hybrids moulded from clay and spirit; his fever is ours, the fever of our Western civilisation that 'descends into hell with trumpets and drums', and its miserable adornments are the distorting image of our symbols of social prestige. His folly is that of presumptuousness and mortal Man as he is described by Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, the Man who,

Dressed in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep . . .

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.