

Anne Karpf/Foreword: *Testimonies of Resistance: Representations of the Auschwitz - Birkenau Sonderkommando*, eds. N. Chare and D. Williams (Berghahn)

It is hardly surprising that it has taken so long for representations of the Sonderkommando, the 'special squads' of Jewish prisoners grotesquely tasked with the running of the crematoria in the extermination camps, to be accorded sustained, scholarly examination of the kind offered here. Even as more testimony left by these toilers at the epicentre of terror was unearthed (at times literally), so too did the analytic tools available seem inadequate to the task. Primo Levi's 'grey zone' - "the space that separates... the victims from the persecutors"<sup>1</sup> in which the "hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary"<sup>2</sup> Sonderkommando had to operate - appears with the passage of time to have got greyer and darker still. So fraught with ethical complexity is the subject of the SK that for a long time it was cordoned off from what one contributor to this volume calls *le champ du visible*, its exclusion from the scrutiny afforded other aspects of the Holocaust horribly confirming its 'specialness'.

The editors of this volume, however, make the persuasive claim that the SK is central to our understanding of the Holocaust. (As Levi insisted, it is "indispensable to know [the occupants of the grey zone] if we want to know the human species".<sup>3</sup>) They also, correctly, see it as a form of resistance, a way of foiling attempts to 'conceal the crime'. Yet this is a book about how the unimaginable has been imagined. The unimaginability of the SK experience is compounded by the undesirability of imagining it - a reluctance to enter inside the abject, the innermost circle of hell, a place of negation of life. So, a book like this must break a taboo: it involves the transgressive act of imaginatively entering, if not the gas chamber itself then its environs - and to do so not as a potential victim, and without lapsing into voyeurism. As Levi also said, "one is tempted to turn away with a grimace and close one's mind: this is a temptation one must resist".<sup>4</sup>

If one does indeed resist, one enters a world so unmoored from normal structures of meaning and feeling that it risks the dissolution of language itself. It is shocking to read, for example, in Chaim Herman's letter to his wife and daughter that, when he arrives in Birkenau, he is sent to work in the SK supposedly as a member of the Chevra Kadischa. This most honourable of voluntary roles involves preparing the body of a deceased Jew for burial with respect and reverence: the members of Chevra Kadischa ritually clean and then dress the body. Although the letter does not make clear whether Chevra Kadischa was a term employed by the Nazis or (more probably) Herman himself, its use in this context to denote a process in which the body is treated with the utmost contemptuous savagery illuminates in a flash the inversion and perversion of the *univers concentrationnaire*.

For such material a new kind of trans-disciplinary approach is therefore needed, one that can synthesise the critical tools provided not only by history but also by literary and film criticism, cultural studies, linguistics, semiotics, translation studies - indeed archaeology itself. This volume makes rich use of such a trans-disciplinary approach to explore written and visual testimony and representation in the form of texts, photographs, painting,

drawing, film and fiction. To an extent the lapse of time since the end of the second world war facilitates such an approach: with the death of the surviving members of the SK scholarly scrutiny seems in some sense – even if this is irrational - less ‘personal’. At the same time, however, even more detective work is now required to explore and analyse traces of traces, inevitably leading sometimes to conjecture and speculation. This in no sense diminishes the careful scholarship of the book. On the contrary, this is history and historiography of the finest order, simultaneously analysing representations of the SK and the difficulties of such analysis, a treatise on the limits of representation and interpretation but also the necessity. In its refusal of claims to absolute knowledge, its deployment of diverse and sometimes divergent perspectives and by drawing attention to missing fragments of evidence, this volume (like its two predecessors<sup>5</sup>) honours the ultimate ineffability of its subject.

There can be no disagreement about the enormity of the challenge of representing the SK, especially in film. This has been reflected in the heated and sometimes hostile reactions to scenes in the most feted filmic depictions, *Shoah* and *Son of Saul*. When Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* (1985) ruthlessly goaded the barber Abraham Bomba, a member of the Treblinka SK, to re-tell his testimony while cutting hair in a barbershop that Lanzmann recreated in Tel Aviv, Bomba became, as one of the contributors to this volume puts it, “acteur de son propre témoignage” in an iconic but controversial sequence that made terribly visible the return of the repressed and which has been accused of retraumatising the survivor.<sup>6</sup>

*Son of Saul*, on the other hand, has been mostly lauded for its eschewal of a survivor-centred story, its refusal to provide redemptive narrative relief and its acoustically dense soundtrack. Lázlo Nemes’s 2015 film, which has played an important role in foregrounding the SK in recent cultural memory, is nevertheless critiqued in this volume in a variety of ways, including the charge that, in the film’s penultimate frame, it offers the consolation of an escapist ending through the smile that spreads across the protagonist Saul Ausländer’s face when he sees a living child, suggesting that he dies happy. (One cannot read a book like this without entering into a spirited dialogue with it. I myself don’t read this shot in *Son of Saul* in that way: I see it as a stylised sequence – almost a dream sequence - in a markedly different register from the rest of the film. As such, it serves the *opposite* purpose, a reminder that Ausländer has been entombed in the world of the dead and of the consequent impossibility of his returning to that of the living – an impression confirmed a few frames later when we see the fleeing boy grabbed and silenced by the hand of an officer and hear the shots that signal that no-one can escape the murderous reach of the German soldiers. In my reading Ausländer does not die happy; he is happy *because* he is about to die.)

One of the challenges faced especially by film-makers and writers in representing the SK is to find a cultural form that cannot easily be assimilated into the surrounding cultural products and remains distinctive, but which does not at the same time fall back upon self-

regarding aesthetic devices. What liberties can be legitimately taken to make a cultural product readable or watchable – indeed bearable? In attempting to make even the most grotesque aspects of the Holocaust thinkable about, the essays gathered here raise a host of other, often unanswerable, questions too. What, apart from the attempted SK rebellion, can meaningfully be classed as resistance? How can a scholarly engagement with the subject of the SK avoid becoming occluded by a visceral reaction of revulsion or, at the other extreme, the objectification and dehumanisation experienced by SK members themselves? How can both scholars and creative artists engage with the subject without either sacralising, banalising or decomplexifying it? (Levi's own thinking about the subject was anything but schematically reductive: as an essay here points out, it was sometimes inconsistent and contradictory.) And finally, what lies between the heroization and the stigmatisation of the members of the SK – and beyond the dispensing of moral judgements?

The contributors work hard to avoid such polarisations and, in their examination of both the testimony of the SK and their representation, exhibit a sensitive reckoning of fact, after-effect and after-affect. The tender care with which evidence and its provenance are treated is itself moving - in its keen sense of the different nationalities and cultural identities from which the SK were drawn, for instance. (Particularly valuable is the material on the Greek members, curiously marginalised in mainstream Holocaust narratives for so long.) For this volume not only reclaims the SK's legitimate and important place in Holocaust research but also re-endows its members as far as is possible with the humanity that the Nazis so violently despoiled, along with the scraps of physical and moral agency remaining to them. (The traces of vanity that are visible in some of the SK testimony, for instance, while shocking, at the same time show that even in extreme circumstances such forms of human preoccupation remain.) As such, this collection has a strong moral as well as historical dimension, serving not just as scholarship but also as an example of the mourning to which scholarship can contribute - research as a form of Shiva.

Mourning, in the case of the Holocaust in general and specifically the SK, can never be completed: in Freud's terms, we can never overcome the loss of the object.<sup>7</sup> This book nevertheless is an important and timely contribution to a vital aspect of the Holocaust that will itself seed further research and debate and will significantly enlarge our understanding of forced labour in the Auschwitz crematoria and its representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Levi, P., [1986], 1989. 'The Grey Zone' in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Trans: Raymond Rosenthal, p.25. London: Abacus

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.27

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp.25/26

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.37

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<sup>5</sup> Chare., N. and Williams, D., eds., 2013. *Representing Auschwitz: At the Margins of Testimony*. Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave Macmillan; Chare., N. and Williams, D., 2016. *Matters of Testimony: Interpreting the Scrolls of Auschwitz*. Oxford: Berghahn Books

<sup>6</sup> LaCapra, D., 1998. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, S., 1914, 'Mourning and Melancholia'. *The Standard Edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol.14. Trans: James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press