

Bringing the Past into the Present: Family Narratives
of Holocaust, Exile, and Diaspora

Missing the Holocaust: My Father's Account of Auschwitz from August 1943 to June 1944

Philippe Bourgois

University of California, San Francisco

Abstract

Conversations with my father over many years reveal how genocides unfold invisibly in front of ethical witnesses. In August 1943, he was deported as a forced laborer by the French Vichy regime to work in the construction of the IG Farben petrochemical factory at Auschwitz, where he was recruited into a resistance group. His precise recollection of exactly what he knew or did not know, and what resistance acts he and his companions undertook demonstrates how terror can make uncertainty a strategy for survival as well as resistance. My father dissects multiple contradictory interpretations of ethical motivations for everyday acts of kindness and betrayal. He refuses to identify clear heroes or villains, ultimately condemning only those in power, especially Allied leaders who had the knowledge and logistical capacity to intervene, but instead allowed the trains to run on time. Primo Levi's concept of the Grey Zone alerts us to how institutionalized brutality overwhelms the possibility of human solidarity. What genocides and Grey Zones are we missing today? [Key words: Jewish Holocaust, Nazis, World War II, Service du Travail Obligatoire, Auschwitz, Grey Zone, genocide, French history, IG Farben, ethics]

The Buna is as large as a city; besides the managers and German technicians, forty thousand foreigners work there, and fifteen to twenty languages are spoken. All the foreigners live in different Lagers [concentration camps] which surround the Buna: the Lager of the English prisoners-of-war, the Lager of the Ukrainian women, the Lager of the French volunteers and others we do not know. Our Lager (*Judenlager. Vernichtungslager, Kazett*) by itself provides ten thousand workers who come from all the nations of Europe. We are the slaves of the slaves whom all can give orders to, and our name is the number which we carry tattooed on our arm and sewn on our jacket.

— Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*

Where are the stories of all those people living around Auschwitz who watched the death camps take place?

— Tom Luke, *Auschwitz survivor, interviewed in 2003*

For much of my adult life I have been tape-recording conversations with my father about his experience as a forced laborer in the epicenter of the Nazi Holocaust at Auschwitz. His account of daily life among the civilian workers building the factories that surrounded the death camp supports the well documented lesson of the “banality of evil,” provided by the moral philosopher, Hannah Arendt—herself a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany and then from Vichy France—in her analysis of the petty, self-seeking but efficient rationality of Adolph Eichmann, the quintessential bureaucratic Nazi war criminal (Arendt 1963). Many of the autobiographical descriptions of death camp survivors eloquently document the routinization of mutual betrayals among victims who are pushed to struggle for survival under institutionalized conditions of overwhelming cruelty and violence (Levi 1996, Steinberg 2000). Some—especially the women survivors—emphasize the heroism and social solidarity that resist these impossible conditions (Delbo 1995, Eliach 1982, Hart 1982, Pollak 2000); some highlight the sadism of those who are in positions of power (Borowski 1976); most intermingle accounts of solidarity and sadism (Kertész 1992, Kluger 2001). My father’s story, however, also emphasizes the banality of agency and heroism.

When I told my father that I was writing this article about him, he protested that his experience in Auschwitz was “trivial compared to what the Jews endured.” But it is precisely the peripheral quality of his story that can teach us why genocides continue to be part of the human condition. His uncompro-

missing account of everyday life on the margins of the death camp contributes to understanding how abnormal violence and systematic institutionalized cruelty are masked by the bureaucratic routines and cultural norms that administer local level hierarchy and privilege. Most importantly, by taking a close look at how my father, in good faith, failed to see the mechanism and magnitude of the Holocaust while it was unfolding before him, even as he actively resisted the Nazi genocidal industrial complex, we can understand how it has been possible, in the half century since the Nazis, for other genocides to occur repeatedly all across the globe. More subtly, his account suggests that we may be missing the magnitude and mechanisms of the socially-structured suffering (Bourgois n.d.) that unfolds all around us today but is routinely unrecognized—to use French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (2000) term for the normalization of oppressive social conditions by both victims and perpetrators who become convinced that privilege and hierarchy are natural and even moral.

My father wants me to begin by clarifying that he does not deserve to be considered a Holocaust survivor. He was not in the extermination camp where Jews and the Gypsies were brutalized to death in the name of racial hygiene. Nor was he a political prisoner/slave laborer slated for death, in contrast to Jadwiga Lenartowicz Rylko, whose life story is presented by her daughter in this volume. He was a forced laborer, housed with other deported workers as well as with volunteers who were fleeing unemployment in Nazi-occupied Europe. He and his companions received enough food to survive and were paid wages with incentive bonuses: “Compared to the people who were in the death camp, Auschwitz was a picnic for us. I am almost ashamed to be in the same volume as real survivors, because the horror of their lives was so much greater.” My father also reminds us that although he was forcibly deported from France to Auschwitz, the Germans allowed him out of his concentration camp on Sundays, “we even went swimming in the nearby river.” He worried that I might represent him as a hero because I wanted to focus on his participation in resistance activities. “I was simply lucky,” he insists.

The Banality of Agency

My father emphasizes the limits of agency both with respect to positive and negative actions, whether it be resisting, tolerating, or collaborating with the Nazis. Choices were limited by chance, and by accidents of personal backgrounds and capacities. When he presents the ideological orientations of indi-

viduals, he emphasizes their historical context and their often contradictory and passive qualities, over-determined by family, class origins and biographical contingencies. At the same time he carefully identifies the negative consequences of the conflation of petty self-interest and idiosyncratic ignorance among those who hold power over others. He conveys this rejection of the heroics of individual action and political consciousness in his account of his own attempt to avoid deportation to Nazi Germany:

I didn't really know why or what was going on, but I just did not want to go. Everyone in the class of 1942, that is to say born in 1922, was drafted to go work in Germany.

My father wanted me to go. He supported Pétain. He kept saying, "The Germans are saving us from Communism." He wasn't pro-German—he had been in World War I—but he was anti-Soviet, having personally witnessed the Russian revolution in Siberia where he was posted as a diplomat. He was not so much an anti-Communist, just anti-Russian.

I did not want to go. The Germans were fighting against the English and I was an Anglophile and I could tell it was a horrible regime. I mean, they were making me go work for them. I knew that was not a democratic thing to do.

I had falsified my identification card. The mayor's son in the village where one of my uncles had a country house helped me do it. He was not in the resistance; he was just that kind of younger boy—always eager to make friends and tag along with the older guys. He could have gotten his father, the mayor, in trouble for falsifying my papers.

I didn't tell anyone about my fake I.D. I had gone to live with another uncle in Monaco. It was safer there because of some kind of agreement between the Prince of Monaco and the Germans. But my father did not like it that I was a draft evader. He was worried it might lead to difficulties for the family. "*People will talk about it [ça va faire des histoires].*"

My uncle didn't care, but he did not want to get involved. So I went back to Nice where my parents were living. That is where the French Police caught me, coming out of a movie theater. It was the French—not the Germans—who deported me. They double-checked my papers with the precinct, and they could see that my date of birth had been changed from 1922 to 1923; or maybe they just had me on a list sent from Paris. They let me go home, but a few days later they came for me and said

“Please follow us. Take a suitcase.” And I did. They drove me straight to a train—a normal French passenger train but with police guard.

We went all the way to Germany. Near Berlin, people were put in various groups to be sent to various places. And I was sent to a place which had no meaning for me. It was called Auschwitz. I don’t know why they sent me all the way to Auschwitz; they could have sent me to a closer factory in Germany or Austria. Maybe it was because I had falsified my papers, or just bad luck. I don’t know for sure if they noticed that I had changed my birth dates.

My father thought it was very good that I was working at Auschwitz in the Obligatory Labor Service. The Allies did not bomb that far east. So frankly, from that perspective, maybe it was safer to be in Auschwitz than to be in a factory in Austria. My cousin was deported to Austria and was bombed all the time towards the end of the war. He was lucky to come out alive but had difficulties adjusting to normal life for a long time. It left a mark on him.

My father is quick to point out that he does not know whether his father or uncle (who worked in some capacity for the Prince of Monaco) might have had the power to prevent his deportation. While noting matter-of-factly their failure to comprehend the historic stakes of the Nazi occupation of France, he does not consider this to be a reason for condemning them in retrospect. He sees them as no more short-sighted than most other members of the French upper middle class [*les bourgeois*]. “There were no German soldiers at that time in that part of the South of France and many felt that the situation was not bad, with a World War I hero, Maréchal Pétain, as head of the government and General de Gaulle with the Allies in London.” In the same vein, the mayor’s son who helped him falsify his identity card is not presented as a self-conscious, noble resistor, but rather as a mischievous, possibly irresponsible adolescent.

As a child, I sought a scenario of heroes and villains in my conversations with my father about Auschwitz and seized on his accounts of having resisted deportation. However, when I asked him to retell those episodes, he insists on self-deprecation.

The train stopped in Lyon, and the guy who was sitting next to me said, “Let’s get out.” He had been talking to me about escaping the whole time. The guards had gone to drink at the water fountain. I followed

him, but I didn't really know what I was doing. And unfortunately for me I realized just as I was leaving the station that I had left my best new raincoat on the train, so I went back to get it. [Slapping his hand to his forehead.] What a jerk [*Quel con*]! And then it was too late. The guards were walking back and forth along the tracks.

Those of us who ended up in the Obligatory Labor Service were more dumb than anything else—losers [*Plutôt con qu'autre chose—des pauvres types*]. The smarter—or luckier—ones obtained fake papers or a fake job and then maybe joined the resistance in the last three months of the war. But a lot of them also got themselves killed doing that.

Maybe it was for the better because I didn't have a plan. I had no contacts in Lyon. No place to go. I could not have gone home. My father would have been too upset at my refusing to do my duty. I was worried about all that at the time.

His first job at Auschwitz was on the construction site of the IG Farben factory, overturning railroad carts full of excavation debris. The worker he was replacing had fallen into a cart with debris the previous day. "I wasn't sure if he had died. It was not the kind of thing you dared to ask." Despite my father's relatively privileged status as a so-called "Free French Worker," food was limited. Luckily—as my father would say—the French worker in charge of his barracks took a liking to him, and ensured that he ate. My father does not interpret this help as evidence of generosity or altruism. On the contrary he presents it as the irrational, and perhaps even immoral, favoritism of a man with access to a tiny corner of local power. The flimsy distinctions between expressing kindness and engaging in arbitrary favoritism evaporate in my father's understated account.

There were barracks everywhere, surrounded by barbed wire. It was a camp of French workers, maybe about 700. The first day, I didn't know how to get food. There were so many people at mealtime. They gave us some bread and three slices of *saucisson* and then there was a big cauldron of vegetable soup. By the time I made it to the front of the line after everyone else, there was nothing left except liquid.

Then the head guy in the barracks... threw his knife down in the middle of the table and made everyone stand back and said, "The young guy eats first [*Le petit mange premier*]." Because you see I had gone with no food the previous day.

After that I ate better. He liked me. I don't know why. He was a carpenter and a pimp from Marseilles who was also dealing in tobacco and falsified ticket rations. A tough cookie [*dure de dure*]. He worked as a roofer specializing in high altitude structures.

My father specifies in detail the acts of betrayal on the part of individuals and institutions abusing their positions of local power, as well as the disproportional pressure of circumstances on the socially vulnerable and the gullible—the “losers” on the margin of history:

Most of them, like me, were drafted to work in Germany through the Obligatory Labor Service, except that they had been transported to Auschwitz directly through the Vichy Youth Corp [*chantiers de jeunesse*] right when their service period ended. They were led to Auschwitz by their commanding officer! You see, the Youth Corps was what had replaced military service at that time. It was mandatory.

But there were also volunteer workers in the barracks with us who had been unemployed in France and came to work in Auschwitz so that they could send money back to their families. And the French press at the time was announcing on the radio that for every worker sent to Germany a French prisoner of war who was the head of a family [*chef de famille*] could return home to France. That was the propaganda on the Vichy Radio.

Bureaucratic Sabotage, and the Pragmatics of Mistrust

As a child I was especially proud of the fact that my father joined what I thought of as a Communist Party resistance cell at Auschwitz, so as to engage in active sabotage. Once again, however, when, as an adult, I revisit these accounts with him, he purposefully erases suggestions of noble agency and self-conscious political positioning. Instead he notes, with self-critical modesty, the advantages of cultural capital arising from his privileged class background. His critical interpretation of idealism and his emphasis on both idiosyncrasies and social determinism lead him to forgive what appears to be the innate mediocrity and impotence of most individuals in the face of history.¹

The sabotage activities were run by an Alsatian engineer, René Sarger. He was one of those considered to be of honorary “German race”—

Volksdeutch, being tall, blond, and speaking German. He looked more German than the Germans. He had been a prisoner of war, but when Hitler signed the Soviet-German Nonaggression Pact in 1939, he volunteered to become a laborer. He did not criticize the Germans that much. He was more vehement against the capitalists. But when the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union, he turned against the Germans. He said, "I am against them because they are against the communists and therefore against the workers"... But the horror of killing people... of organizing oppression... of not believing in democracy? No.

And that was shocking to me. He loved German culture, German opera. He loved to play Wagner on the piano. He used to play cards and drink with the German officers. He seemed to like the risk and certainly believed that it was useful for hiding his activities.

He grew up in a working class family in a traditionally communist [*rouge*] suburb of Paris but he did well in school and he was a civil engineer, so he was chosen to head one of the groups of French workers within the IG Farben construction site. I was the only one at our particular worksite of bourgeois origin. I was the only one with more than an elementary or technical education aside from the Engineer. He had noticed from my documentation that I had passed the examination to enter the French business school, *Hautes Études Commerciales*, and he needed assistance with a very complex accounting system. His senior accountant had a difficult personality and was a rightist who applied the official accounting rules too strictly. His results reported poor performance. The Engineer wanted help to devise a way of presenting our work in the accounting statistics more favorably. This was essential in order for him to slow down the work systematically without attracting German attention. The trafficking of the accounts that was devised worked progressively more smoothly—if not accurately [suppressing a smile]—over time.

I didn't really choose to work for the Engineer. I had practically no choice. He just involved me without asking. But he had spent several days questioning me about my background and practically everything else about me.

My recruitment wasn't ideological. We would argue politics. I was socialist-minded but I was never a Communist. I thought that among the Communists there was a lot of the Nazi-type attitude towards people. You are controlling, you are obliging people to go do things. They are so

sure of having the truth that if they do not convert you they eliminate you. There is a similarity with the attitude of Catholics and Protestants historically. I was against that. I was a free-minded individual.

The Engineer told me once after a long discussion, “I have been arguing with you for all these months and you are the best proof that the bourgeois must be eliminated. Nothing can be done with you. After the war, it will be your turn: We will have to eliminate you bourgeois.”

Actually he liked me. We were very close as I was the only one with whom he could exchange ideas. We laughed and had fun together. He was very friendly but he got mad too at some of my bourgeois reactions.

But I had the sense that if I became a problem for him or dangerous for him he would have me liquidated. It was horrible but that’s how it was in the atmosphere and conditions in which we were living. There was no pity for the bird with a broken wing. [*Pas de pitié pour les canards boiteux.*]

You don’t know who can denounce you. Your best friend could denounce you. If you are arrested, everyone is capable of denouncing you to save himself. You can’t trust. You are on your own.

I learned at the camp that you should not be too intimate with people, especially with men. Never expect from people more than they can give. Accept them as they are. Always keep yourself a little bit detached, especially with people with whom you have working relationships.

At the camp I applied that: To be nice to everyone; never to have enemies—that is very important! But because I was nice, certain people had a tendency to attack me. They take you for an imbecile... not an imbecile, but for someone who is too nice and can be exploited.

I liked being with the Engineer. He arranged for me to move out of the worker’s camp and live in a warehouse situated very near the construction site. There were five or six others (accountants, repairmen for the equipment, and a crane operator, and a stockroom keeper). The stock keeper also served as cook. The official reason for the move was that some equipment had disappeared in the past and we needed to have people there night and day. The Engineer occupied rooms at the extremity of the warehouse far away from the others and separated by several offices that were empty at night.

I slept in a little room off the back of his office. He had a small radio and we would listen at night under a blanket to the Soviet news in German. I understood little but noted the names of the towns retaken

by the Soviets and kept an up-to-date map of the war. The Engineer then would go to his private room and I never asked questions.

But there was nothing grand about our illegal activities. I only knew two or three people, and they knew probably two or three other people who knew two or three other people, etcetera. I saw them going in to talk to the Engineer, but I didn't necessarily know them. I believe it was organized this way in case somebody was caught. No one ever mentioned that to me but I realized that the Engineer took a lot of risks. I don't know if they understood the risks they took. I remember one time he had sticks of dynamite with him. I don't know how they got it. I don't remember if they used dynamite on the construction site to excavate earth, because the digging was done with machines and with people and the ground was soft with no rocks. I don't know who the Engineer was planning on giving—or selling—the dynamite to. It was not good to ask questions.

After reading an earlier version of an edited transcription of his description of the resistance cell, my father was jarred by the tone of my introductory narrative and analytic comments, as well as by the way I selected and edited his quotes: “We weren't idiots. Of course I was going to work with the Engineer. He was the only one to initiate intelligent actions that were relatively efficient. I did consider this to be moral. It seemed good to me even if it was risky.”

My father then reviewed the entire text, word by word, with a magnifying glass (because he became functionally blind in the mid-1990's). He suggested changes to at least some of the language in almost every sentence in this article, replacing strong words with milder synonyms, and often adding qualifying phrases. It was not until later that I noticed that the pattern of his alterations may reflect the conditions of insecurity at Auschwitz. He carefully weakened any language that might be interpreted as suggesting that he was part of a dramatic network of self-aware saboteurs. For example, he crossed out words such as “sabotage” and “resistance,” replacing them with the milder term “illegal activities.” He substituted “group” for “cell.” Similarly he initially deleted all reference to the dynamite episode but then compromised by clarifying that his memory of the incident was vague and confused. But he circled the phrase “—or selling—” in the dynamite passage and wrote “The Engineer was never involved in shady dealings for personal profit” in the margin.

My father's only remaining possession from Auschwitz is a 5 inch by 8 inch spiral notebook with two pages of writing. One page consists of columns of numbers with instructions on how to calculate incentive pay. When a specific



Pierre Bourgois correcting an earlier version of his son's paper, July, 2004.

task was completed, the minimum wages were multiplied by a “coefficient of evaluation [*Bewertungsgäls*]” which was determined through negotiation with a committee consisting of the “site foreman, engineer, and worker representative.” As a saboteur, the Engineer’s goal was to ensure low productivity. One of the tasks of the resistance group was to lose machinery parts that were difficult to replace, or to modify them so that they would break with routine use. Every delay and accident had to appear innocuous.

The equipment for the firm was mostly coming from France. It had been seized from French factories and there was always something missing. Plus there were always delays with obtaining spare parts. That is what the Engineer told the IG Farben supervisors: “We are ready to work but the equipment delivered does not correspond to the model we need;” or “it hasn’t yet arrived;” or “it arrived but without...” something or other; “and two of my best welders are hospitalized.”

Delays also had to be justified to the French workers because the complicated system designed by IG Farben to monitor productivity affected their incentive pay. Consequently, on any given day, the workers at my father's site who were laying underground pipes at the petrochemical plant may have been more concerned about whether or not their coefficients of evaluation were being calculated advantageously than about resisting the Nazi regime or noticing the plight of the Jewish death camp laborers working next to them. Lost productivity meant lower bonus pay. This increased the risk that a disgruntled worker might denounce the Engineer's delay tactics. It was my father's responsibility, therefore, to mask sabotage while simultaneously ensuring adequate worker bonuses through a "flexible interpretation of accounting rules." Once again, my father talks about this facet of the sabotage in the third person, despite the fact that he both devised and carried it out. Applying Bourdieu's concept of ongoing habitus formation to the narration of three Jewish Auschwitz survivors, the sociologist Michael Pollak argues that individual survival strategies in the extermination camp "durably impregnate the personality, beyond the period of internment" (Pollak 2000:301). Perhaps my father's distanced way of speaking is a protective reflex conditioned by his particular location in resistance activities in the ambiguously civilian periphery of Auschwitz:

For every construction task, the Germans assigned an expected length of time for its completion. It was very complicated. If the task was finished sooner, then the workers received extra money. It was easy to finish our tasks in the allotted time, so the workers usually maintained a good salary. But the Engineer made everything go slowly...

Those who had previous experience with this kind of work knew certainly that the figures were exaggerated and more favorable to them. I remember one worker who used to complain, "It's a disgrace [*C'est lamentable*] to work this way. This is not real work [*C'est pas du vrai travail ça.*]" He was a good worker... too conscientious to engage in sabotage.

Other volunteer workers said they did not care whether they worked for a French or a German boss—a Nazi or a capitalist. "There is always a boss" they said. All they cared about was getting paid.

Bureaucratic rationality and procedures camouflage power and render brutality invisible, but they can be made to do the same for subversion and resistance.

In order to obtain historical documentation of my father's deportation to Auschwitz, I filed a claim for legal reparations from Germany for forced labor. The language of the files that were located and summarized by the International Tracing Service for the Holocaust and War Victims Tracing and Information Center prevents a historical recuperation of the processes of coercion and resistance. My father's deportation to Auschwitz in 1943 is described neutrally as a normal labor transport procedure and also refers to his departure from Auschwitz the day after D-Day as if it were a routine exit. My father, in fact, escaped from Auschwitz on a German train transporting troops to the western front. He was re-arrested in Paris at the train terminal by the French police and he again escaped. Perhaps the bureaucratic gloss on my father's departure was intended by nervous clerks during the war to dissipate any potential waves over local incompetence, mismanagement, or sabotage. Because the International Tracing Service presents files as a summary, it is impossible to know if the letter quotes directly from the original World War II era documents or paraphrases them. In any case, the neutral language of bureaucracy erases coercion from the record.

Pierre/Bernard/Maurice BOURGOIS was employed by IG Farbenindustrie Corporation, Auschwitz plant, living at: IG Farben Community Camp Dwory. He was registered on 23 May 1943 at an employment office, name not given, and on 3 June 1943 at the Bielitz employment office. In the document it is noted: In the country since 3 August 1943, he left the country for good on 7 June 1944.

Claims by "Western European former forced labourers, such as French civilians, including those persons who were subjected to Service du Travail Obligatoire en Allemagne" are, however, routinely rejected (International Organization for Migrations 2004:1). The formal "Notice of Rejection of Claim for Slave or Forced Labour" echoes exactly what my father told me when I submitted the request for restitution: "I don't deserve any compensation."

More importantly, this bureaucratic process more than fifty years after the war confirms the structural ambiguity of civilian forced laborers in Auschwitz, placing them in a mediocre ethical space as undeserving victims in their own eyes and that of history. Bureaucratic parsing of categories of worthy victimhood normalizes the larger Nazi industrial complex at Auschwitz by explaining, in precise detail, that only racially or politically targeted laborers were eligible for reparations payments because "extremely harsh living conditions..."

such as... irregular and poor nutrition, housing in poor and very overcrowded collective accommodation, miserable working conditions and poor pay... do not in themselves suffice for compensation for forced labour” (International Organization for Migrations 2004:1). This same rejection letter demonstrates that the ethics of decreeing good-enough victimhood are officially ambivalent across cooperating bureaucracies. The letter includes a separate sheet from the Austrian Reconciliation Fund, noting that “In contrast to IOM’s German Forced Labour Compensation Programme” the Austrian fund awards restitution to “former forced labourers, including French civilian forced labourers who served at least part of their deployment as forced labourers during World War II on the territory of the present-day Republic of Austria” (International Organization for Migrations 2004:3).

Resistance in the Grey Zone

The Jewish Holocaust survivor and renowned author, Primo Levi, worked in the same IG Farben factory as my father. He identifies a phenomenon that he calls the Grey Zone: A morally ambiguous space of structurally imposed mutual betrayal where victims are forced to collaborate with the enemy in order to survive. In the Grey Zone, survival imperatives overcome human solidarity as individuals jockey desperately for a shred of advantage within the hierarchies of the camp, so as to live a little bit longer. Prominent actors in Levi’s Grey Zone include the *Kapo* who runs the barracks, the *Sonderkommando* member who disentangles the gassed corpses of Jews to extract their gold teeth before burning them, and even the famished inmate with no privileges, who grabs a piece of bread out of the mouth of a dying neighbor.²

In the Grey Zone, everyone is capable of betraying anyone because life and death stakes are so high and ethical lines so impossible to decipher. My father’s understated non-celebratory way of talking about resistance and mundane idiosyncrasy at Auschwitz made me worry, as a child, that his sabotage cell group might have been composed of particularly immoral individuals. Worse yet, maybe he was telling me that human character is fundamentally mediocre, even among those who had the sense to resist the Nazis. I was excited, consequently, by his tale of smuggling food to Jewish workers who came from the death camp. At last I could construct a narrative of good guys fighting the good fight.

Once more, my expectations were thwarted, for my father generally avoids talking about the distribution of food, and when he does (usually at my insis-



Pierre Bourgois in front of the gates of the former IG Farben petrochemical factory, on the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, 1995.

tence), he preserves and reproduces the strategic uncertainty he used in the camps to minimize risk of exposure. Half a century later that strategy for evading Nazi repression may explain my father's exacting precision over what he and his companions did or did not know and do:

For a short time we provided food to a group of Jewish prisoners at the construction site. It was probably the carpenter from Marseille, the pimp who obtained false food tickets, who made this possible. But I am not sure; he seemed to know everyone, even the guards at the entrance of the work area. He could go at will out of the camp carrying things in a very well made toolbox with a fake compartment for smuggling things. I think he was later arrested; I'm not sure. I have a terrible memory. Even before the war as a child I already had a terrible memory. But I have to stop talking because it is taking me hours to tell this story. [Philippe protests, and he continues.]

They gave me a bag containing bread to bring to the work area because I could come and go through the gate, bringing things, medicine, instructions, spare parts, whatever. I was told to leave the bag at a designated spot near where the Jewish workers were digging the trenches for the crane operator to lay the pipes and for the civilian workers to weld them. In this case, a Jewish commando remained in the trench while the big pipe was lowered. The Jews left and I did not see the bag. The welders started working.

And there were several thousands... probably ten thousand people in that work area of IG Farben. So there was a time where you were like I am with you [pointing to the distance between our chairs] next to a Jewish worker with a shovel who was finishing the job, covering the pipe over. And the trick was to put the food in the pipe that the workers were pushing so the guy could pick it up and hide it.

The people we gave food to were French-speaking Jews but I didn't talk to any of them. It was totally forbidden to fraternize with the Jews. One risked finding oneself in the extermination camp if caught talking to them.

I found out later something bad happened. I can't remember exactly... there were just rumors. Maybe someone was caught. Maybe the Jewish commando was relocated and it became too dangerous, but the food delivery was stopped and I heard that a Jewish prisoner said, "We're going to denounce you unless you keep bringing bread." You see, they were going to die anyway.

My father does not want there to be any hint of heroism on his part, or for that matter, on the part of his resistance companions. Nor does he construct a path for blame in the threat of betrayal on the part of the starving Jewish worker in this rare account of solidarity. His concern to de-essentialize agency especially its heroic or villainous interpretations becomes more evident in his corrections to my transcription and editing of bread smuggling. The following is an excerpt from my field notes of March, 2003.

I play my father the tape-recording of my American Anthropological Association talk on his escape from Auschwitz. During the first few minutes he stops the tape several times to correct "inaccuracies." Then he gives up and just shows visible irritation throughout most of the playback, shaking his head most of the time, but also occasionally smiling

when he agrees with something. My tone and presentation obviously jar him. As a shy, modest person, he considers this paper to be a narcissistic exercise. Nevertheless, at the end his eyes well up with tears, and he nods affirmatively.

He then launches into detailed corrections, often seemingly minor or even obsessive. First, however, he tells me in a very grave voice that the most important point for him to clarify is his involvement in smuggling bread to the Jewish inmates:

“There are many serious inaccuracies in your account of my stay in Auschwitz. The bread part is wrong. I had wanted to correct the written copy that you gave me earlier but I can’t see well enough anymore.

It did not happen like that. I am not a hero. I didn’t bring bread... that many times. And it wasn’t only bread. We also brought sausage. But I only brought food once that I remember. Well, maybe more, but only once that I knew of. Because you see, I was always carrying bags in and out of the work site. That was my job as the Engineer’s assistant to carry messages, spare parts, and orders. I had to walk around the work site so it was normal for me to be delivering bags.

One of the guys in the office told me to take the bag in. I don’t even remember if he told me exactly where to put it. I often just left bags somewhere. And I didn’t actually put the bread and sausage inside the pipe. I just put it to the side so someone else could. I am not sure that we understood the full consequences of the risk we were taking.

But the food distribution was a much much more limited operation than you make it sound. They were only little bags because the Jews had to be able to hide them right away.

Normally I had nothing to do with the food supply. I mean that I knew of. Yes, I knew that it was being brought that day by Mr. So-and-So. It was my job to know who was going to that area of the construction site on any particular day.

Supplying food was not the Engineer’s main objective. His primary concern was to slow down the work. In fact, the connection between the food distribution and the Engineer was never clear to me. It may even have been happening independently from the Engineer but was just tolerated by him. He never talked to me about it. You had to keep your cards close to your chest so it was all ambiguous to me.

Also, I don’t know for a fact that a Jewish worker said “If you don’t continue to bring us bread we will denounce you.” I did not hear it. I

was not there; and I did not even talk directly to the person who heard it. It was what someone else said they said—only a rumor. Maybe it was someone's racism against the Jews. Maybe they made that up so that people did not feel bad about not giving bread any longer. Or maybe the Jewish commando was transferred somewhere else and it became too dangerous to deliver the bags of food. I was not sure at the time. No one was sure of anything.”

Levi, who tends to emphasize mutual betrayal in his writings, nevertheless attributes his survival at Auschwitz to the luck of meeting an Italian civilian laborer at the IG Farben plant who risked his life every day by illegally sharing his bread with Levi for the final six months prior to liberation (Levi 1996:125). So, according to Levi, solidarity can exist in the Grey Zone. These altruistic acts, however, are contradictory from an ethical perspective because they must be isolated acts. Help cannot be extended to everyone in need since almost everyone is on the verge of death. The requirement of rationing one's solidarity to isolated friends or family pits individuals against the overwhelming needs of others. This kind of zero-sum ethical impasse is the core of the Grey Zone: One has to ignore the dying and even step over them—if not on top of them—in order to stay alive or to keep a friend or family member alive. This has led the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2000:157-159) to interpret Levi as arguing that the most ethical witnesses to the Nazi Holocaust were the so-called “*Muselmänner*.” “Muslims” was the derogatory nickname given to those prisoners who had metamorphosed into “walking corpses” due to malnutrition and horror. Expressionless and hunched over, the *Muselmänn* sought scraps of food in the garbage, oblivious to the social disorder around him or her, and became “a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions” (Améry 1980:9).

Levi and Paul Steinberg, another Jewish survivor who also worked at the IG Farben petrochemical plant, remind us that we do not have the right to judge those who survived or those who died, because the Grey Zone is omnipotent. It overcomes human solidarity and replaces it with the species sense of individuated survival or else it kills you (Levi 1988, Steinberg 2000). Nevertheless Levi contradicts his own insistence on the impossibility of judging survivors and devotes a large part of his writings to dissecting the ethics of survival at Auschwitz. For example, he specifically condemns fellow campmate and survivor Steinberg (whom he calls “Henri”) for turning all his human interactions in the camp into a scientific self-interested calculation to seek marginal

instrumental benefit to keep himself alive (Levi 1996:104-106). Most importantly, in his later writings, Levi expands the borders of the Grey Zone to alert us to the limits of humans in coercive institutional contexts. Levi draws a universal lesson from this, warning us to recognize as an ethical imperative the less extreme Grey Zones that surround us every day so as 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” (Levi 1988:40).

In Auschwitz, as my father’s account illustrates, the Grey Zone of mutual betrayal was not limited only to death camp inmates.³ Like Levi, my father refuses to condemn individuals for their actions because of the grotesque scale of the structural institutional forces coercing and confusing them. Yet the precision of his descriptions of the ethical implications of everyday acts and their multiple motivations obliges, as it does for Levi, critical moral introspection. In contrast, Steinberg (2000:108) stays consistent with respect to his insistence not to judge survivors from the Grey Zone. He acknowledges that he “probably was that creature [described by Levi], prepared to use whatever means I had available.” But he replies fifty years later with the question, “Is it so wrong to survive?”

My father has lived in Geneva for the past 25 years and one of his closest friends, Tom Luke, is a Holocaust death camp survivor who was interned in Auschwitz during its final year. Luke is a Czech Jew who was assigned to work at the Krupps factory a few kilometers away from the IG Farben construction site. In January 1945 he was forced onto the infamous death march from Auschwitz to the Mauthausen concentration camp. He lost his toes to frostbite and was unable to stand up. He was put in the *Russenlager*, “some ten or twelve barracks set aside for the dying or incapacitated, pending their elimination” (Luke 2000). His life was saved, however, by the solidarity of a non-Jewish Czech political prisoner, Otto Nesvadba, who was a resistance leader in the camp. This man fed him extra food and hid him from the selections, when the Nazi doctors systematically inspected the entire camp population to separate out the weak and the sick for immediate extermination. Even the solidarity that kept him alive against all odds, however, is deeply entangled in the Grey Zone. The other members of the resistance group berated Nesvadba’s sympathetic interventions for the dying Jew. “They told him to stop wasting his energy on such a hopeless case as mine. They said that he could be saving a lot more people if he let me die. But he insisted on saving me. I was his personal project.” In other words, Nesvadba’s altruism is selective: by helping Luke survive, he is withholding help from others. Luke’s phrase “personal

project” also suggests the arbitrary, power-tripping dimension of solidarity under these extreme conditions.⁴

The logistics of my father's escape⁵ from Auschwitz provide yet another example of the melding of solidarity and betrayal in the Grey Zone of resistance and self-preservation under Nazi rule. The Engineer “organized some papers” for my father to leave Auschwitz by train, but my father does not exclude the possibility that this generous, risky act on the part of the Engineer might also have been motivated by self-protection. In any case, in my father's account the outcome would have been the same regardless of the moral intent or personal attitude of the Engineer.

They called me to the Police station for questioning. I don't remember if it was by the SS or just the local police. Someone must have told them that I was spreading Allied news about the war because I was listening to the Engineer's radio. And that was forbidden.

But I didn't say anything because I fainted right away when the officer asked where I had heard this news. I said, “I don't know.”

“Well can't you locate who...” And so on.

I was super anxious and very weak from diarrhea and I also have this tendency ever since I was young, to feel dizzy when I am nervous and hungry, or even when I blow in a balloon. So I breathed quickly and fainted. I heard the officer calling on the telephone for them to take away “the imbecile who has passed out in my office.” Someone came and took me out, and that was it.⁶

But when I got back the Engineer told me I was too exposed [*trop répéré*]. So he organized some papers saying I had to go to Paris to pick up some equipment to bring it back more quickly.

Although he liked me, he was very tough, and he wanted to get rid of me. I was right next to him and by now I knew too much: “This young bourgeois guy, he may not be tough enough if he is really interrogated.”

You can have another interpretation. You can think that maybe he really liked me, and wanted to protect me. But that is the way he did things. That is what happened to another counterfeiter who made the food tickets. I don't think it was the pimp but someone else who worked with the Engineer before I arrived. The Engineer planted some sausage or soap in the guy's bed and denounced him so that it looked like he was a trafficker when in fact the guy had come under suspicion from the Germans and so the Engineer wanted to get rid of him.

The Engineer never told me that he did that. But it was implied—a rumor. And I always kept this in mind that he might also do this to me.

I left the day of, or the day after, the Allied disembarkment in Normandy. Foreigners were not allowed to travel on trains, but the Engineer told me, “Go! It’s a big mess. They don’t know what is going on in the trains. And the worst that can happen is that you might get sent back.” He told me to travel in second class instead of third class and to dress well. Then he bandaged my knee, so I had to be helped into the train through the window. The train was full so I was supposed to be injured.

And I crossed the whole of Germany with three bombardments, passing through three police controls, with piles of people, young German officers in the wagon, and they never checked my papers carefully.

A German officer was sitting next to me. He spoke French and was very friendly. He loved the French the way some Germans do. But he did not pay much attention to me. He had his own worries with the Allies landing in Normandy.

Then in Paris at the train station, a guy in civilian clothes, a French man asked me for my papers. “You do not have the right to travel by train.” And I was rearrested. But I was sick. I told him, “I have diarrhea.” And I had all the signs of it. He let me go to the toilet and stood outside at the door.

And so I’m sitting on this toilet thinking, “What am I going to do? There were eight or ten of them out there.” And then I heard, “beep, beep” the sound of a taxi. And I said, “If there is a taxi there, then that’s the street.” And there was a window right in front of me. “Why don’t I jump?” Which I did.

My father made the mistake of running straight to his parents’ apartment building across town. The French police in the train station had seized his real identity papers, with his correct home address and promptly sought him out at his parents’ home. By yet another stroke of luck the concierge of the building was a local leader of the resistance fighters and hid my father in a servant’s quarters [*chambre de bonne*] at the end of the building’s courtyard. The concierge told the French police that he had not seen anyone from the Bourgois family for over three years since they fled to the South of France. My father does not take the actions of the concierge at face value. Once again, this may be a legacy of surviving on the margins of the Grey Zone where it was

necessary to compartmentalize and render ambiguous acts of resistance because that knowledge was potentially deadly.

The concierge was the one on our block who ripped up the cobblestones to build the barricades against the Germans right at the moment of the liberation. I saw him with the FFI armband. But there is no way of knowing if he really was a resistance fighter. People don't talk about this, but many resistance fighters joined when the Allies were already in Normandy. In his case it might have been just one or two days before the liberation of Paris. By then almost everybody was a *résistant*.

The Invisibility of Violence and Genocide

At the age of 80, on a vacation trip to the Island of Ré, a tourist destination for families off the coast of Brittany, my father had a series of nightmares ostensibly triggered by the tourists having fun, oblivious to the institutionalized violence surrounding them⁷:

There is this enormous prison for recidivists on the Island yet despite that it is an ideal spot for families to go on vacation because the little kids can go to the beach by themselves on bikes because there are few cars.

It's all very friendly [*sympathique*]. It's the real France [*la France profonde*]. But I had two terrible nightmares. Both were practically the same. I was once again in the Camp. You see the landscape of the Island of Ré is not all that different—flat and grey—but at Auschwitz it was mud most of the time instead of sand.

It was the beginning of my time at Auschwitz and we were walking in rows to get from our barracks to the construction site. And these pretty blond Polish girls—beautiful the way Polish girls can be—with their summer light skirts floating in the wind were passing us without a smile on bicycles on their way to work. It's exactly the same thing on the Island with those prisoners. [Pausing to drink more wine].

You've got these guys locked up behind bars in their prison and they watch the tourists go by on the way to the beach. They pass maybe 150 or 200 meters away. All those pretty girls in bathing suits on their bikes.

And so we were walking in rows and the girls were passing us... Just pedaling by and ignoring our reality. I had this impression that I was right back in the work camp, and I was trying to run away but I wasn't advancing.

He ended this conversation by telling me about a new Amnesty International report critical of the “scandalous conditions in French prisons.”

My father is acutely aware of how easy it is to walk past those who suffer without noticing anything out of the ordinary. In discussions of his experience at Auschwitz, he describes the open hostility towards Jews that was evidenced by the French civilian laborers. Most importantly, he examines the dynamic of non-awareness with excruciating precision.⁸

There was no sympathy for the Jews among the French workers. Some of them would say, “It does the Jews good to work with their hands finally.” I remember that. I was in shock because by then we all knew that the Jews were starving to death.

We weren’t allowed to fraternize with the Jews. We saw them walking in groups to work passing about six feet away from us. You could see how skinny they were, their bones showing through their skin. [Pausing with emotion]

But, we weren’t exactly fat, either. I was skinny as heck because I had diarrhea all the time—just like Steinberg says in his book.⁹ But my bones were only showing a little bit.

When the smoke from the crematorium blew our way, they would joke, “They are burning dead pigs again today.” They knew the Germans were Protestants and that they burned the dead. [Pause]

I remember one guy who would bite into his sausage and say, “Shucks more Jew today. [*Zut encore du juif aujourd’hui*].” But that is the way the French are. They like to crack nauseating jokes. It’s called *gauloiseries*. French jokes are either very dirty or very mean, but always in bad taste.

Very quickly we understood the harshness of the concentration camp but I never knew about the gas chambers or the selections. [Pausing, then speaking slowly.] I did not consciously reject anyone telling me that the Jews were being killed in the gas chambers and then burned. There were not even any rumors about it. What we did know was that the Germans were starving the Jewish workers to death, and what we saw was terrible.

I had studied economics, and I could not understand why the Germans did not feed the Jews. I kept saying to myself, “It is not logical. They need their labor. Why are they starving them to death?” It was a mystery. But I did not talk to anyone about being horrified. There was

no room for showing feelings in the Camp. It was my first time in a working class place like that. I was a bourgeois who had been sheltered from a rough life. I had to modify systematically my general behaviors, ways of speaking and eating. I had to prove that I was tough enough just to sit at the table with them. You kept things to yourself. You didn't know what you could say.

Besides those guys were only concerned about their own problems. They were reacting to the generalized tension of the place. The fact that they were cracking grotesque jokes shows that they were nervous about it [*ça les interpellait*]. They were trying to prove to one another that they were tough as nails [*des dures de dures*] and that it did not affect them. Nobody wanted to be taken for a weakling [*pleurenicheure*].

When I got back to Paris right before the liberation I told my friends, the ones who were feeding me and even my friends in the resistance, that "The Nazis are starving and working the Jews to death in huge camps." They thought I was exaggerating; that I was telling stories to make myself sound more interesting. It bothered them [*C'était gênant*]. They did not like to hear about it. That is all. I didn't talk about it much thereafter.

Friends of my father from that period confirm that he never talked about Auschwitz with them. After reading a draft of this article one friend exclaimed, "I can't believe I didn't ask him about it. We knew he had been there. I am so embarrassed." I visited the Engineer's widow in 1995 in a traditionally Communist suburb of Paris and she confirmed that the Engineer had also refrained from talking about Auschwitz even though the Soviets put him in charge of repatriating the forced (and the voluntary) French workers at IG Farben.¹⁰

Critics during and after the War have tried to make us aware of how we distance ourselves from the violence towards others that undergirds—or in the case of the Holocaust, is the objective of—the system of labor and leisure in which we are indicted. Franco Basaglia, himself an Italian resistance fighter, imprisoned by the Nazis, used the term "peace-times crimes" to call attention to the cruelty of institutionalized psychiatry in insane asylums in the 1960's (Scheper-Hughes and Lovell 1987). Walter Benjamin, a Jewish Marxist literary critic and philosopher, who was trapped on the French-Spanish border fleeing Hitler's invasion of France, wrote shortly before committing suicide: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (1968 [1940]:257).

More recently, Scheper-Hughes developed the term “everyday violence,” while working in a shanty town in northeastern Brazil in the 1970s, to critique the “social production of indifference to child death” (1992). She has also referred to the “small wars and invisible genocides” that cause the socially vulnerable to suffer inordinately (1996). These dramatic labels are useful for exposing the pathology of what most people accept as normal and necessary. They warn us, following Levi’s extension of the margins of the Grey Zone, of the existence of a “genocidal continuum” across societies and throughout history that renders invisible the systemic brutalities that organize social life (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004:8).

Duty to Know

What is most significant about my father not knowing about the selections and the gas chambers, despite working downwind from the death camp, is that one of his jobs as a member of the Engineer’s sabotage group was to spread Allied war news. Since he listened secretly at night with the Engineer to the radio, he had access to anti-Nazi propaganda being broadcast by the Allies.

If there is anything I feel guilty about it is not knowing what was going on. I realize now how incredibly dumb I’ve been all my life, over and over. I’ve been present at terrible or great historical moments and not understood what was going on—not grasping the clues.

I think all the time of this one French Jew who I talked to one time. We were on the back of a flatbed truck sitting or crouching and when the guard was not looking he bent forward and told me [whispering] “They are starving us.”

He showed me his knee. The joint was all swollen [Rolling up his pants and pointing to the articulations of his own knee]. You could see the outline of the tibia meeting the base of the knee, visible through the skin.¹¹

He told me that he had been taken straight from what I thought was the race track [*champ de courses*] directly to Auschwitz. And it is horrible to say, but I thought that he was a little bit stupid because I thought he meant the stadium of Longchamps where they race horses. And I was thinking, “Why the hell did this guy, a young Jewish male do such a risky thing as to go to the horse races in the middle of the war in Paris? He must be totally dumb.” You see, I thought he had been caught at an identity check point while exiting the horse races like I had been at Nice

coming out of a movie theatre. But he was trying to tell me that he had been rounded up into the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* where they race bicycles.

And for years that was my story. It was not until I read articles... and saw the movie "The Sorrow and the Pity"...that I learned that the Jews arrested in Paris were concentrated in the *Vélodrome d'Hiver*... Before that, I couldn't conceive that the French were rounding up the Jews into stadiums for deportation to work in Germany, let alone for extermination. I read about it later. I was the one who was dumb.

Do you think that young man could have survived? It was in May of 1944. [Pausing with emotion] No, the Soviets did not liberate Auschwitz until much later. He must be dead.

Living in hiding in Paris after his escape in the months prior to the liberation, my father telephoned his own father, who had fled to Nice in the South of France with his mother, and he tried to tell him that the Germans were starving Jewish workers to death in huge concentration camps. "My father told me to shut up [*tais-toi*]. 'Certain things are best left unsaid. [*Certaines choses ne se disent pas*]. It's dangerous.'"

My father is not sure whether his father silenced him because he was a rightwing, anti-Semitic supporter of Pétain or if he was being reasonably cautious about the telephone lines being monitored. Either way it is the unsaid that allows normal people to run trains on time in the midst of holocausts and creates what anthropologist Michael Taussig calls "public secrets," referring to state terror in Argentina and Colombia during the "dirty war" (Taussig 1992, see also Suarez-Orozco 1987). My father does not think it is fair to blame the common person from the comfortable vantage point of history. "It is only afterwards that you realize that the position that you held [*la ligne que tu tenais*] was good or bad. It's all relative. Imagine if the Germans had won."

I asked Luke, my father's Czech survivor friend, how it was possible that civilians at Auschwitz might not know about the gas chambers. At first he was adamant in his response, "Everyone had to know but people want to pretend that they didn't know." When queried, however, he discussed in detail his own ignorance as well as that of his fellow Jewish deportees when they stepped off the cattle car at Auschwitz to face the Nazi selection.

There were thousands of guards and *kapos* and many of them had girlfriends in the surrounding population. They must have talked to them. I cannot believe that people did not know.

Every SS man had a father, mother, brother, girlfriend, etcetera. There were tens of thousands of them if you make the tree and spread it. But after the war they all said, "We didn't know."

It is not only the German Nazi activities of the extermination camps that "nobody knew about," but also the Soviet Gulag. Nobody knew!

I maintain that whoever wants to know, knows. The others who quote-unquote "didn't know," didn't want to know. Like my Argentinean acquaintance at the consulate who "didn't know."

In the late 1970s I had lunch with the Consul of the Argentinean Mission to the United Nations here in Geneva, and I mentioned to him the habit of the Argentinean government at that time of torturing people and taking them and flying them over the sea and dropping them into the sea. And he told me, "This is not true. This is anti-Argentinean propaganda."

I met him ten years later, and I said, "You remember our discussion of ten years ago? You maintained that the dirty war wasn't true."

And he answered, "I didn't know." That was a useless conversation. It's some kind of self-protective mechanism where they don't want to know.

This prompted me to ask Luke, "But you have told me that you too didn't know what was happening at the time. How do you explain that? You had been in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt for a year already before you were transported to Auschwitz." Laughing gently, Luke replied:

Of course. In other words, why did we agree to board the trains? When I was boarding the train in Theresienstadt, I didn't know that five days later, I will face crematoria and gas chambers.

There is an interesting story: A group of so-called Jewish elders administered Theresienstadt. They were under the top supervision of the SS, the Nazis. A young man named Lederer escaped from Auschwitz and then smuggled himself back inside Theresienstadt to warn us. He told the elders. They did not believe him, and they threatened to denounce him to the Germans if he does not stop talking.

So maybe half a dozen of the Jewish elders in Theresienstadt had a warning about what goes on in Birkenau and Auschwitz. Nevertheless, they did not stop the transports. Why didn't the elders warn us? I think they did not want the confusion. Or they were scared of being punished. They wanted to preserve their own skin. They were the kind of people who obey orders.

And why did the Allies not bomb at least the rail lines leading to Birkenau? They answer, "Well, how could we have? We could have killed some prisoners." But of course that is just an excuse.

The rabbis told us, "This is a decision of God." But I'm not a believer, because if there were a God, he wouldn't have allowed Auschwitz, death chambers, etcetera. He would not have allowed a Mr. Idi Amin, Mr. Qaddafi, Mr. Saddam Hussein, the military in Guatemala, and the list is very, very long.

At this point my father interrupted,

I know. The biggest mystery about God is why he is such a sadist.

Luke: Yes. What a bizarre idea.

Philippe: Were there rumors going around about the gas chambers?

Luke: There were no rumors, but it was obvious that something bad was happening, at the other end of the train ride. People did not want to go, but they did not show any active resistance in Theresienstadt. When we were loaded we were loaded. But again, why didn't the elders let us know? If I had known, I would have not boarded the train. They couldn't have caught all of us if everyone had run all at once.

When he arrived in Auschwitz, Luke's life was saved by a few words whispered by a *Sonderkommando* member inside the cattle car moments before the selection.

Tom: One of the prisoners, who serviced the evacuation of the train, came to me and said, "You're healthy; you're 18; and an agricultural worker. Your father is 40; healthy; and a metal worker."

Philippe: Why did you pay attention to what he said?

Tom: Instinct. I had no knowledge. But the train ride itself was a nasty forewarning. To be in a cattle car, locked up and sealed, with 80 other people for five days. Nothing to eat; no drink; no toilet... one bucket, which after a couple of hours spilled over onto the floor. You had a taste of what is coming.

And then there you are. You get out in the middle of the night. There is screaming and yelling and barking and shooting and beating. So you understand very quickly when somebody comes to you and tells you some kind words.

Philippe: Would the man have been killed if the Germans heard him talking to you? Why did he bother telling you?

Tom: Yes, they would have killed him. But there was such a mess; so much shooting; so much barking of dogs. He did a good deed. It didn't cost him anything; so why not do it? He was a decent human. Like I said before, nobody is entirely black or entirely white. Every human being, even the blackest, has somewhere a spark of humanity. So why not tell us?

We had made a group of five of us in Theresienstadt who knew each other in that particular wagon. The other three guys didn't understand what was happening at the selection. One was a doctor; one was a lawyer; one was a businessman.

And then we were all lined up to face the German doctor, who decided which way we go. The three others were in front, then came my father, and I was the last of the five in that line. When the German asked the first one from our group about the condition of his health, he said, "I have impetigo on my leg." When another German asked, "What's your profession?" He said, "Lawyer." That man was sent to the right.

The second one from our group said he was a doctor. He was sent to the right. And the third one also.

Then came my father. He gave the wrong date of birth and said he was a metalworker, who was healthy. They sent him to the other side. And I was an agricultural worker; and I was older than I actually was; and I was in good health. I was sent to the left, like my father. But the other three...

I asked the *Kapo* in the barracks, "Where are the others?" He pointed to the chimney, saying "They went through the chimneys, up to heaven. Don't worry about it. You will soon follow."

Many testimonial biographies by Holocaust survivors confirm that upon arrival at Auschwitz, even at the end of the war, most prisoners did not know about the gas chambers. In fact the Jewish Auschwitz survivor, Ruth Kluger, describes debates inside Birkenau itself in the summer of 1944 about the "rumor" that the Nazis were burning Jews, killed after the selections:

There were discussions of whether it was technically possible to cremate as many people as rumor had it. The optimists thought that the "crematoria," the "chimney," took care only of those who had died of more or less natural causes. (Kluger 2001:101, see also Pollak 2000:173-174).

Kitty Hart, who was assigned to the privileged “Kanada” commando that sorted the personal possessions of those who were selected for gassing at Auschwitz-Birkenau, talks in detail about the inability of most victims to comprehend what was happening to them. For almost a full year she saw hundreds of human convoys walking to their deaths.

Nobody seemed to notice while queuing for this ‘disinfection’ that the first batch from their convoy was already dead and burning. How could they not hear the screams? *We* heard them. And what did they make of the smoke and stench pouring out of the chimneys? Perhaps it was so far beyond their comprehension that they shut off a part of their mind and senses (Hart 1982:120).

Hart refers to denial as a survival mechanism, “You didn’t want to believe...Perhaps something awful was being done to other people, but you were better off not knowing, or at any rate, not being quite sure” (1982:83). What she calls her “numb, deaf and blind” defenses (1982:121) collapsed the first time she saw a gas chamber being operated. “It was no longer possible to pretend even to yourself that the stories could not conceivably be true” (Hart 1982:112, see also Pollak 2000:104-105). Most remarkable is her account of describing the mechanism of the genocide to a group of SS officers from another region, assigned to guard them on the death march following the Nazi evacuation of Auschwitz:

He called other guards into a small office. “Now,” he said quietly. “Sit down. Tell us about this gas.”

We all talked at once, interrupting each other. As it all poured out he began to shake his head. The other men in the room looked shattered. I realized that it was not that they disbelieved us; they simply couldn’t take it in (Hart 1982:143-144).

Blaming Those in Power

In retrospect it seems preposterous that the Holocaust occurred invisibly in front of so many people—victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. In fact, perhaps it was quite normal. My father corrected an earlier version of this article with an explanation that the word “genocide”—let alone the concept—did not exist prior to Auschwitz. Arguably this is a good sign. Perpetrators, by-standers

and even victims need to misrecognize genocide in order for it to occur efficiently on a large scale. Scheper-Hughes and I have argued that it is useful to conceptualize genocide as existing on a continuum of possibilities across war and peace that ranges from mass murder to symbolic violence and that connects the intimate to the macro-structural (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). Recognizing the genocidal continuum helps explain why most violent acts are not considered deviant. On the contrary, they are re-defined as moral and responsible acts, as the journalist, Phillip Gourevitch, argues in his account of the Rwandan genocide (Gourevitch 1998). Metaphors of work, community solidarity, nationalism, and even democracy obscure the real nature of what is happening—setting the stage for misrecognition, the dynamic explored by Bourdieu (2000) whereby oppressive hierarchies are legitimized as the natural order of things by both the vulnerable and the powerful.

My father is not convinced by this conceptualization of genocide and the misrecognition of unjust social orders. He points instead to the importance of individual and institutionalized resistance as evidence of the potential of humans to refuse the normalization of brutality and institutional oppression. However, each time he revisits the crucial episodes in his accounts of confrontation with the Nazi order, such as smuggling bread, talking to Jews, sabotaging the work process, possessing dynamite, spreading news from Soviet radio broadcasts, fainting under interrogation, or even recognizing someone who hid him from the police as a legitimate member of the resistance, he relives the necessity of uncertainty in the Grey Zone. At Auschwitz, knowledge of resistance was deadly. Uncertainty protected one's comrades and oneself. Fifty years later, consequently, he reflects with excruciating accuracy on the ongoing impossibility of knowing who really were heroes, despite his desire to identify them.

But there are heroes. There were people who fought. Just not people that I knew in my experience. There was the story in the camp, for example, of a Dutch boy, a civilian worker, who was arrested for facilitating the escape of British prisoners of war. He would exchange uniforms with them at the worksite. He was finally arrested and sent to the extermination camp. People said he did that to get cigarettes and chocolate.

But I think the Dutch boy was a great guy. As a matter of fact there were two of them doing it together, a father and a son. Maybe people who are mean-spirited [*salaud*] present a great guy in that way in order to defend their own weakness.

Most Communists were also altruists. For us, Communists are not egotistical people who kill. That is just American propaganda. Communists are more like good Catholics, devoted people. It's the same thing in the Muslim religion. The most extreme Muslims today do a lot of good works for the poor. They're nice and they're mean at the same time. It is hard to draw a line between the two.

Despite my father's concern with relieving the "ordinary man" from direct responsibility for the Nazi Holocaust, he is determined to assign institutional and individual culpability with precision. More specifically, he condemns the most prominent individual culprits in positions of power who could have made a difference, as opposed to the low level cogs in the machine of genocide. He names names and denounces those admired politician-heroes who, in fact, may be historic war criminals.

The real guilty, apart from the Nazis, of course, who were the most guilty of all—they killed western civilization—were the leaders of the Allies. Especially Churchill and Roosevelt. Those big men. They knew that the Germans were killing the Jews and they did not do a thing.

The Allies never revealed what was happening. They could have told us. They could have warned the Jews over the radio: "You're going to be sent to camps to be killed." Let me tell you things would have been different at Auschwitz. The Jews would not have walked passively into the gas chambers. Even the French civilian workers would have been different. They would not have just stood there laughing at the Jews.

So the Allies are guilty, too, vis-à-vis the Jews—not just the Germans. I don't know why people don't tell the truth about all that now.

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his personal account of surviving Auschwitz. I thank him for forgiving me for writing a text that is, from the perspective of a survivor, “misleading and in places inaccurate.” My father’s extensive comments on a half dozen “final drafts” made me alter the tone of the article and the structure of its central arguments. I incorporated his corrections when they clarified misunderstandings on my part or elaborated significant nuances. I accepted his right to censorship of words and interpretations that particularly offended him, but I did not show him this final version because I am sure he would still find passages that would make him throw up his arms: “This is total crap [*C’est complètement con*! You don’t understand a thing [*Tu ne comprends rien*].” He is probably correct in saying that I “have completely misunderstood” his experience at Auschwitz and that I impose my “isms” on his story. I apologize for having made him relive the trauma of Auschwitz in such excruciating detail—conversation after conversation, tape-recording after tape-recording. I thank him for his patience and courage in doing this project with me.

ENDNOTES

¹On an earlier draft of this article, Nancy Scheper-Hughes noted in the margin at this point in the text: “Pity the Nation (or the historical moment) that demands heroes of ordinary people.”

²The Jewish Holocaust survivors Kitty Hart (1981) and Imre Kertész (1992) specifically write about taking bread from dead inmates. Kertész describes eating the bread and soup that his dying bunkmate in a death camp “hospital” was too weak to claim:

He was running a fever, judging by the heat unceasingly streaming from his trembling body... I wasn’t able to wake him for the morning coffee... I took his bread portion too, and I had his soup in the evening, until one day he began to behave very strangely... he was carried out along with the others... (Kertész 1992:133)

Hart specifies that she and her mother (who worked at the so-called hospital in Birkenau) drew the line as a point of honor between taking food from already dead inmates rather than those who were still dying (Hart 1981:67, 71-72, see also Pollack 2000:172). Loung Ung, a child survivor from the Cambodian killing fields, also describes snatching bread from a dying woman to keep herself from starving (Ung 2000).

³Steinberg describes being swindled by a French civilian laborer at IG Farben who pretended not to know him after paying him the first installment of what was supposed to be a total of 12 rations of bread in exchange for two gold teeth. Steinberg was trading on behalf of a starving inmate in the death camp who had extracted his own teeth in desperation. Steinberg reports that he repaid the starving man bit by bit out of his own daily allocation to make up for the loss, but the man died of hunger after Steinberg had only a chance to repay him the eighth ration of bread.

⁴In her introduction to Dr. Svetlana Broz’s book of testimonies by Serbs, Croats, and Bosniacs whose lives were saved by a member of another ethnic group, anthropologist Laurie Hart notes that it is often difficult to distinguish “a game of self-aggrandizement” or “clientalism” from a solidary act of protection (Hart 2004). See also the discussion of triaging medicine, food, and care by Jewish inmate doctors in the Birkenau “hospital” (Pollack 2000:156-171).

⁵My father requested I delete the words “Escape from Auschwitz” from the title of the first version of this article because, “It makes me sound like some kind of hero, when, in fact, all I did was obtain—with the help of the Engineer—some papers to ride the train back to Paris” (Bourgeois 2002). Characteristically, in the text he replaced “escaped from Auschwitz” with “managed to leave Auschwitz.” At the time, of course, it was crucial that he be taken for a malingeringer to protect others from implication—hence his understanding, over half a century later, of

the mixed, multiple, and generally banal individual motivations for what appear in retrospect to be brave, heroic or despicable acts in the eddies of dramatic historical moments.

⁶My original American Anthropological Association presentation (Bourgeois 2002) carelessly referred to my father "passing out under SS torture." At my father's insistence, I changed "passing out" to "fainting," and "SS" to "German Police;" and "torture" to "interrogation." He was not satisfied with these corrections and re-recorded the long passage in the current version that begins "They called me to the Police station for questioning..."

⁷My father's nightmares may also have been precipitated by my interviews with him as we had been tape recording his story just prior to his going on vacation to the Island of Ré. On another occasion, following an intensive series of tape-recording sessions to correct "serious inaccuracies" in a draft of this article, he told me over the telephone, "I wake up at night now sometimes trying to remember. The weight of all the memories comes back but the facts are strange... the details confused. I am not sure what I remembered and what I heard afterwards. It's now in my mind constantly."

⁸Levi specifically discusses the failures of the civilian workers at the IG Farben petrochemical plant to resist the logic of the Grey Zone. He describes how they took their privileged status for granted and treated their starving Jewish co-workers as "untouchables... worthy of our abasement... This does not stop many of them throwing us a piece of bread or a potato now and again" (Levi 1996:126-127).

⁹My father is referring to a book by the Auschwitz survivor Steinberg (2000), who was on the same IG Farben work crew as Levi: "Dysentery put the final touch to my degradation...I cover the last mile back to camp with my right hand jammed between my buttocks to keep the diarrhea that was slowly draining from me soaking through my trousers and running down my legs into my clogs" (Steinberg 2000:71). Coincidentally, Steinberg also describes a French forced laborer at the IG Farben work site who, "On the morning of June 7... brings us news of the landing in Normandy. He's wildly excited" (Steinberg 2000:97).

¹⁰Many death camp survivors discuss how their friends and acquaintances immediately after the war were unwilling to hear or comprehend their accounts (cf. Delbo 1995, Hart 1982, Kluger 201).

¹¹ Levi (1996:106) describes how Steinberg used to show civilian laborers on their work site "the scars on his shins" to elicit help. He was one of the inmates most skilled at cultivating relationships with civilian laborers and prisoners of war on the IG Farben work site to obtain extra food (Levi 1996:104-106, 88).

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