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 ani-
mals, 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 enor-
mous 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 disap-
pointed: 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 pre-
vail, 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 anolog-
gous experience, expected to find a terrible but decipherable
world, in conformity to that simple model which we atavis-
tically 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 sol-
idarity 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
Primo Levi

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.

The Grey Zone

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 changeover 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 naive, 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 surv-