



“What was ‘The Grey Zone’?”

A-Level Activity

Introduction

In his memoirs of Auschwitz the Italian-Jewish survivor Primo Levi reflected on the involvement of Jews in organisations such as the Jewish Councils in the ghettos and the *Sonderkommando* units in the death camps. For Levi, this effective involvement of Jews in their own and others demise demonstrated how the Holocaust blurred lines of distinction between victim and perpetrator, and created situations where people had to make impossible choices. In order to begin to understand this highly ambiguous moral terrain, Levi put forward the notion of “the grey zone”: a figurative and sometimes literal space where some Jews compromised and collaborated in the attempt to survive. Passing judgement on those who dwelled in this area is seen by Levi as highly pernicious and fraught with danger, but the concept of the “grey zone” can be used to highlight to students some of the moral and ethical dilemmas that the Holocaust created.

The following activity is intended for use with students aged 16 and over, and offers ways in which teachers can approach some of the most complex and challenging issues to arise from the Holocaust. Although detailed historical knowledge is not essential for the task a degree of understanding is assumed, and the more extensive and nuanced this is then the more they will be able to contribute and benefit from the activity. The task is based

around one of the testimonies available on WW2History.com and as such teachers will at least need to be able to play students the relevant audio clip. Depending on the abilities of the group, the teacher may also decide to provide or encourage students to consult with the transcript of the testimony.

Starter Activity

- Students should be provided with the following quotation. This could either be through projection or inscription onto a whiteboard, or by giving pupils a copy of the quotation.

‘It is a grey zone, with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It...contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge’

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

- In pairs ask pupils to discuss their immediate thoughts about the quotation, before putting this quotation into their own words and sharing this with the rest of the class. The teacher will then be able to correct and clarify any misunderstandings.

Main Activity

- Explain to pupils who Primo Levi was and the origins and principles of the “grey zone” concept, and gesture to how this notion will be explored through consideration of one survivor’s testimony.
- Depending on available facilities, students are either played or asked to listen to the testimony of Toivi Blatt. As they do so, encourage them to consider the questions on the questions sheet. These can then be used to initiate either a paired, group, or whole class discussion once the testimony is finished.

Plenary

- As a class, students return to their rewording of the Levi quotation. What was the “Grey Zone”? Why is it important to our understanding of the Holocaust? What are the consequences of the “grey zone” for our definition of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders?

Questions to Consider

- Toivi explains how the Nazi invasion was followed by an increasing fear of his neighbours and what they might do to him. How significant is it that these people tended to be Catholics?
- Having initially escaped deportation, Toivi describes Janek's betrayal. What possible explanations can account for Janek's actions?
- Toivi recalls that 'when you are young and you are fifteen years old, you see the trees, you see the flowers – you want to live'. Does this resolve to live, to survive, diminish as we get older or as a result of our experiences?
- Reflecting on being selected as a carpenter, Toivi gestures to the compassion of the German officer. Why might he want to see humanity in this person?
- Toivi describes watching his parents being taken to their deaths and how in the situation of Sobibor he 'didn't even think' about visibly mourning their fate. Do you agree with his explanation that it was 'nature' that protected him? What is this 'nature' and under what conditions does it operate?
- We learn from Toivi of the ways in which the Nazis deceived the victims. Why did they go to these lengths?
- Toivi's job of cutting the hair of the victims meant that in some ways he was part of the killing process. Should we, or can we, judge him for this? Why did he not refuse to be involved?
- Of the night when some three thousand were killed, Toivi remembers the 'beautiful night' and how the 'stars are in the same place'. Has the world changed since the Holocaust happened?
- In answer to the question of what he learnt, Toivi maintains that 'nobody knows themselves'. Is this true?
- Toivi admits that even when someone is nice he asks 'how will he be in Sobibor'. What does this tell us about the impact and the legacy of the Holocaust?