



NOOIT MEER
AUSCHWITZ

More than Words

Reflections on *The Zone of Interest*, the
Sonderkommando, Testimony, and Liminality

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Abstract

This MA thesis discusses Martin Amis' 2014 novel *The Zone of Interest* and the way it portrays and represents the Sonderkommando through intertextual and historical references, the characterisation of the main characters and the use of testimony. The zone of interest (German: *Interessengebiet*) was the area surrounding a concentration camp which was cleared of its native population and original structures. The novel was named after this area and tells the story of a concentration camp through four different characters: camp commandant Paul Doll and his wife Hannah, government liaison Angelus Thomsen and Sonderkommandoführer Szmul. The research question was: How is the Sonderkommando represented in *The Zone of Interest* and how does Martin Amis deal with this through intertextual and historical references, notions of liminality, and testimony? First, the novel and the Sonderkommando are introduced and the thesis is outlined in the introduction, and then three chapters discuss the novel and the Sonderkommando from various viewpoints. The conclusion was that the book paints an image of the Sonderkommando as moral, pained, thoughtful people, through Szmul's narrative. This is in contrast with many views, including that of Primo Levi, whose work inspired Amis in writing this book. Through intertextual references, Amis engages in a critical conversation with Levi, Arendt and Bauman on various topics. He shows disagreement with both Levi and Arendt on key points of their arguments, and with that, presents a new and nuanced perspective on the Sonderkommando as prisoners and as people.

Keywords: *The Zone of Interest*, Sonderkommando, Liminality, Testimony, Intertextuality, Primo Levi, Hannah Arendt, Holocaust Literature

Samenvatting

Deze Engelstalige masterscriptie gaat over *The Zone of Interest* (2014, vertaald als *Het Interessegebied*) van de Britse schrijver Martin Amis, en de manier waarop in dit boek het Sonderkommando wordt geportretteerd door middel van historische en intertekstuele verwijzingen, de karakterisering van de hoofdpersonen en het gebruik van getuigenissen. Het “interessegebied” (Duits: *Interessengebiet*) was het gebied rondom een concentratiekamp dat vrijgemaakt was van de originele bewoners en bebouwing. Het boek is vernoemd naar dit gebied, en gaat over het leven van vier personen in het kamp: commandant Paul Doll, zijn vrouw Hannah, regeringsliaison Angelus Thomsen en Szmul, de leider van het Sonderkommando. De onderzoeksvraag luidde: Hoe is het Sonderkommando vertegenwoordigd in *The Zone of Interest* en hoe maakt Martin Amis hiervoor gebruik van historische en intertekstuele verwijzingen, elementen van ‘liminaliteit’, en getuigenissen? Allereerst is wordt het Sonderkommando uitgelegd, het plot van het boek doorgenomen, en de opbouw van de scriptie uitgelegd in de introductie. Daarna gaan drie hoofdstukken in op verschillende aspecten van de roman en het Sonderkommando. De conclusie van deze scriptie was dat Martin Amis in dit boek via Szmul’s verhaallijn een beeld schept van het Sonderkommando dat contrasteert met het beeld wat veel eerdere schrijvers en denkers hadden, waaronder Primo Levi, wiens werk Amis inspireerde. Het Sonderkommando van Amis heeft een moreel kompas, lijdt aanzienlijk onder hun omstandigheden en werkzaamheden, en denken na over wat hen overkomt. Ze zijn bovenal mensen. Met zijn intertekstuele verwijzingen gaat Amis een kritische dialoog aan met Levi, Arendt, en Bauman over verschillende onderwerpen. Hij is het met Levi en Arendt op belangrijke punten oneens en geeft zo een nieuw en genuanceerd beeld van het Sonderkommando als gevangenen en als mensen.

Trefwoorden: *The Zone of Interest*, Sonderkommando, Liminality, Testimony, Intertextuality, Primo Levi, Hannah Arendt, Holocaust Literature

This very book is drenched in memory; what's more a distant memory. Thus it
draws from a suspect source, and must be protected against itself
Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a
non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension.
Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*

Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped me through it,
but mainly to my sister Jitte,
who knows me better than anyone in this world
and who never fails to make me smile

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Preface

When I tell people the topic of my research, these are the two questions I hear most frequently: “Isn’t that way too depressing to study for months on end?” and “Isn’t everything known about that already? And how are you going to get new information, aren’t you a bit late?”

The answers are a bit more complicated than a simple ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Because while studying the Holocaust can indeed get a little depressing, it never stops being interesting. And no, not everything is known about that yet, although much already is. And while, no, none of us who came after will ever know the events of the Holocaust from anything other than how they are presented to us, this does not mean that no new information or insights can come from this, especially as we slowly enter a time without living survivors.

My knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust is largely dependent on what I read in the past twenty months, from when I was first introduced to the concept of ‘Holocaust literature’, and the years before that, when I read the occasional history book and many a Wikipedia page to just understand the magnitude of the biggest genocide of our time. In this day and age, studying the Holocaust is more than history, more than trying to figure out and understand what happened when, where and why. This we know. We may not comprehend the implications of it, but we know what happened.

Today, studying the Holocaust is studying the representation of the events in our present-day society: in our cities, through museums, parks and memorials; in our culture, through literature, film, and art, but also the way it is used in the media and in politics. For example; in recent debates about refugees in Europe, the British Kindertransport entered both sides of the debate, with both sides using and manipulating the events to match their political agendas. No more than a year after the then-Prime Minister of the UK, David Cameron, praised Sir Nicholas Winton for his effort of rescuing Jewish children from Czechoslovakia, did the conservative party vote against an amendment to the immigration bill, proposed by Kindertransport evacuee Lord Dubs, to allow 3,000 unaccompanied Syrian children to enter the UK.

But this thesis is not about politics. As a student of literature, my focus lies on the literary aspects of Holocaust testimony. In particular, on that of the ‘crematorium ravens’, as Primo Levi called them: the Sonderkommando, those who were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria. Very few survived and even fewer gave their testimony or published memoirs, which were then not all translated into English. Not much was known about them, and indeed, I had never even heard of the Sonderkommando before. I came to the topic through discussions with my supervisor, who suggested that I look at the new film *Son of Saul*, which explores two days in the life of a Sonderkommando member who, in the multitude of corpses in the gas chambers, believes he recognises the body of his son and does everything in his power to give the boy a proper Jewish funeral. When I saw the film, I was deeply impressed and shaken to the core, but I did know that I wanted to focus on this topic. I found that I was unable to use *Son of Saul* in my research, as it was not yet available for all

audiences, and had yet to come to the cinema in the United Kingdom. I then decided to stay in the field I was more comfortable in: literature. In 2014, Martin Amis published his novel *The Zone of Interest*, in which one of the narrators is a member of the Sonderkommando. By my knowledge, this is the first fictional narrative to include a 'Sonder' so explicitly. That alone makes it special, but it is an interesting novel in many different ways, although not everything can be explored here.

The cover image is a photograph of Jan Wolkers' Auschwitz monument in the Wertheimpark in Amsterdam. The monument consists of a bed of broken mirrors with a glass headstone saying "Nooit meer Auschwitz" (Never Again Auschwitz). On the plaque next to the monument, Jan Wolkers wrote the following:

To create a memorial in a place where an urn containing the ashes of Auschwitz victims rests on Dutch soil seems like an impossible task. How can you find a way to remember a crime that you feel will not be erased even if our planet will dissolve in the universe in two or two thousand centuries. You break your head wondering whether you can create an image that will be able to reflect the shame and grief. You look at the sky and you can't comprehend that this same blue sky stood above this horror as peaceful and unmoved as if it stands above a meadow with flowers. And in a vision of justice you see the blue sky above as it bursts, as if the horror that took place on earth below has forever damaged it. That is how I came up with the idea of placing cracked glass on the small plot of earth just above the urn. In this place the sky will never be able to be reflected purely. (Jan Wolkers, via Auschwitz.nl)

Mirrors, windows and reflections are a common symbol in Holocaust memory. Elie Wiesel chose to end *Night* with his own reflection, a corpse, contemplating him. Zygmunt Bauman, in his influential work *Modernity and the Holocaust*, described it as "a window, rather than a picture on the wall [and,] looking through that window, one can catch a rare glimpse of many things otherwise invisible" (p.viii), and Martin Amis introduces us to Szmul's narrative with a story of a magic mirror that shows you your soul and then goes on to say: "I find that the KZ is that mirror. The KZ is that mirror, but with one difference. You can't turn away" (p. 33). It is thus no coincidence that the subtitle of this piece is *Reflections on the Zone of Interest, the Sonderkommando, Testimony and Liminality*, because as an outsider, a latecomer, I can do no more than reflect on what is presented to me.

I am grateful that this is all I will ever have to do.

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Introduction

In the late summer of 2014, British writer Martin Amis (b. 1949) published his fourteenth novel titled *The Zone of Interest*. Twenty-three years after he first wrote about the Holocaust in *Time's Arrow* (1991), he returns to the subject with “a love story with a violently unromantic setting” (qtd. in Traps 2014). This novel is the subject of this Master’s Thesis, and is discussed in the context of Holocaust literature, Amis’ previous works before analysis two central concepts: bearing witness and the problems of testimony, and liminality, a concept that was developed and explored by anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner and means the ambiguity that occurs in a transition phase or ritual¹.

The Zone of Interest begins in August 1942, and tells the story of a Nazi officer, Angelus ‘Golo’ Thomsen, who has arrived at a concentration camp and has become enamoured with Hannah Doll, the wife of camp commandant Paul Doll, and Doll’s reaction when he finds out about the relationship. Doll decides to order Szmul, the leader and a long-serving member of the Sonderkommando, to murder Hannah. The murder is scheduled to take place on Walpurgisnacht, April 30, 1943, but is ultimately not carried out – Szmul turns the gun on himself and is subsequently killed by Doll. The narrative then moves to the aftermath of the story, and the war. Of the three narrators, only Thomsen survives and it is him who reveals the fate of many of the characters – death, trial and imprisonment, or, in Thomsen’s case, survival. In 1948, Thomsen, who might not have known about the attempted murder, which took place “an hour after [his] arrest” (p. 273), attempts to find Hannah, who has disappeared. When Thomsen finds her, almost by accident, he learns that Szmul revealed the plan to her before trying to commit suicide, only to be shot by Paul Doll before he succeeded. Hannah and Thomsen part ways after she reveals that while he reminded her of what was sane and decent in the camps, now that they are outside of it, he reminds her of the insanity of her past, and, as Hannah says, “imagine how disgusting it would be if anything good came out of that place” (Amis 2014, p. 300).

Although it was not without controversy, with Amis’ French and German publishers refusing to publish the book (Traps 2014), critics were largely positive about the book, with *the Guardian* and *the Spectator* even naming it “the best thing he has written since *London Fields*”

¹ In the context of the Holocaust, it was explored by Primo Levi in his essay ‘The Grey Zone’, the second chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved*, published in 1986.

(Preston, 2014), and his “best for 25 years” (Wheldon 2014). The New York Times finds it “hard to understand” that his French and German publishers rejected it (Kakutani 2014). Critics praised Amis’ humanity in writing (Gilbert 2014; Battersby 2014; Collinge 2014), his use of language, the characterisation of Paul Doll (Reich, 2014), his engaging tone in the afterword (Oates 2014) and attention to detail in a “busy, textured novel” (Battersby (2014). There were also those who were less enthusiastic about the book: David Sexton of *The Evening Standard* writes that it is “bad taste” to write a comedy set in Auschwitz – “It doesn’t work and it’s wrong” (Sexton 2014). Others disliked the misplaced eroticism and anticlimactic plot (Guest 2014; Herman 2014), as well as the lack of unity between the narrators (Hoffman 2014). Oates (2014) found the fiction “strained”, and it was a relief for her when the afterword had “Amis’s unmediated (and very engaging) voice”, and Ruth Franklin, a notable scholar of the Holocaust, wrote in *The New York Times* that:

[While] *the Zone of Interest* is a Holocaust novel consciously of its moment, written for a 21st-century audience that will nod knowingly at the allusions to David Dousset, Paul Celan and Primo Levi [...], it offers no new insights into questions that those writers have more thoughtfully examined. (Franklin 2014)

The character of Szmul, however, was praised by virtually all reviewers: Kakutani (2014) describes him as the moral conscience of the book, Cheuse (2014) as a “virtually Shakespearean figure”, while Franklin (2014) has trouble deciphering what function his character has in the novel and questions Amis’ decision to have Szmul provide the novel’s “central philosophical conceit”, as Wheldon (2014) calls it. Ozick (2014), writing for *The New Republic*, argues that Szmul alone is “immune to the reader’s scepticism”, a narrator who, in combination with the Afterword, “repudiates and annuls all other voices”. Something that remains, however, is that “little is known about [the Sonderkommando], because almost none survived [...] and with the exception of Levi, very few have written about them” (Franklin 2014).

The main reason why little is known about the Sonderkommando is, indeed, because very few survived, and even fewer shared their testimony: about eighty of the last hundred Sonderkommando members survived the war, and that around two-thousand men are thought to have worked in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz for the entirety of the war (Greif 2005; Chare & Williams 2016). The kommando was made up of male, Jewish prisoners who were tasked with “various tasks at specific phases of the extermination process” (Greif 2005, p. 10). They received selected victims from the ramps and the camp, removed their clothing after they went into the gas chambers, moved, sheared and cremated their bodies

after their death, operated the crematoriums, and removed the ashes. The term 'Sonderkommando' (English: special unit) was not used until September 1942, and underwent various changes before it acquired its final form in 1943. Before 1942, prisoners were already forced to remove and cremate the dead, but they were not all Jewish, were mainly recruited on an ad hoc and then somewhat longer-term basis, and were likely killed immediately after performing their tasks (Chare & Williams 2016, p. 5), whereas the Sonderkommando lived for a longer period of time, from three months up to a year or longer. Filip Müller, for example, spent three years in the Sonderkommando (Müller 1979), while Shlomo Venezia was there for 'only' six months. Both survived the war and later published their testimony. The Sonderkommando members were also called 'Geheimnisträger', secret keepers, because the Nazi regime wanted to ensure that the details of the gas chambers and crematoria remained unknown to the world – even though, as Szmul states that "it is my feeling that the world has known for quite some time. How could it not, given the scale?" and cynically asks "Secrets? What secrets? The whole county stops the nose at them" (Amis 2014, p. 34, p. 82).

Whilst working in the crematorium, several members of the Sonderkommando had the courage and opportunity to write down their testimonies and bury them in the camps, so that they could be found later. Seventeen years after the liberation of Auschwitz, researchers found the testimony of Zalman Loewental buried underneath crematorium III. Later, several more testimonies were found, including those of Leyb Langfus and Zalman Gradowski. In 1985, a book titled *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, was published, which contained the writings of these three members of the Sonderkommando. It was compiled, researched and edited by Ber Mark, and his wife, Esther, who continued her husband's work after his death.

Eva Hoffman, writing the foreword to *Representing Auschwitz: at the Margins of Testimony* (2013), states that the most powerful aspect of these documents is their very existence. Here, members of the Sonderkommando wrote down their experiences, often risking their life doing so.

"In the closest proximity to the horrifying process of annihilation, and facing their own almost certain deaths, the scribes of Auschwitz were determined that what happened there should not be deleted from human memory or knowledge; against all odds, they maintained their 'ability to think', necessary for the act of writing, and the desire to understand their surely near incomprehensible situation." (Qtd. in Chare & Williams 2013, ix)

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that though the events of the Holocaust can be described and enumerated, "they remain singularly opaque when we truly seek to

understand them" (2002, p. 12). The discrepancy between knowing about the events of the Holocaust and understanding them, Agamben writes, "concerns the very structure of testimony [...]. At a certain point, it became clear that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to" (2002, 12-13).

As the events of the Holocaust became more well-known, and more and more testimonies, memoirs and autobiographical accounts were discovered and published, it became more problematic to categorise the published works. Holocaust literature, as Roskies & Diamant (2012) define it, with a definition that is "at once formal and flexible, true to the past and attentive to the present", "comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and have been shaped by it" (p. 2). This definition is sufficiently broad to encompass all genres, but it gives no instructions to categorising works *within* the genre of Holocaust literature, which is equally important, since the genre or form of a text (i.e. whether it is a memoir, diary, autobiography, a (semi-)fictional narrative or a novel) significantly influences the reader's experience and interpretation of that text. Now that first-generation witnesses are starting to give way to a new generation of writers, there is an ever-growing number of fictional Holocaust narratives. Some, like Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) are based on a true story and only use fiction to supply the facts; Oskar Schindler really did exist, and really did save a lot of people, and Keneally based his book on interviews with survivors, using fiction, as he writes, only to fill in gaps in the testimony. Others, such as William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979), John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006), use factual information and take liberties with it to support their fictional narrative: they take from history only the setting, and use that setting to create their own universe, which may have elements of and references to history, but which is, in essence, a creation of the novelist. *The Zone of Interest*, clearly belonging in the second category, is one of the first, if not *the* first novel to discuss and engage with the Sonderkommando so explicitly, and in doing so, it raises several interesting questions about the perception of the Sonderkommando, as well as about testimony and Primo Levi's 'grey zone'.

The aim of this thesis is to make a contribution to the body of research about the Sonderkommando and literature about the Sonderkommando by analysing the way in which Martin Amis represents this group of prisoners in his novel and focussing on themes like liminality and testimony. The research question that will be answered is:

How is the Sonderkommando represented in *The Zone of Interest* and how does Martin Amis deal with this through intertextual and historical references, notions of liminality, and testimony?

The answer to this research question will be formulated over the course of three chapters, each of which has a specific focus. In the first chapter, the changing views of scholars on the Sonderkommando are discussed, the literary context of the novel is addressed, focussing on the many elements of intertextuality, and some of the historical context is explored in some detail before discussing how the reader's perception of the Sonderkommando is influenced and shaped by these elements. In the following chapter, the focus shifts to the concept of liminality, which is explored in some detail and its near-synonymy to Levi's concept of the 'grey zone' explained, before analysing the four main characters and discussing their position in the grey zone. The third and final chapter focusses on the role of testimony in history and literature, but also in the novel itself. Here, Szmul's testimony and his struggles with writing and memory are analysed, and the changing role of survivor testimony in both history and literature is discussed, followed by a discussion of the Scrolls of Auschwitz and the way a passage from Langfus' testimony is used in *The Zone of Interest*. The conclusion links these three chapters together more explicitly and provides a comprehensive answer to the research question.

Chapter 1 – Debates on the Sonderkommando, Intertextual References, and Historical Context of *the Zone of Interest*

One of the three storylines in *The Zone of Interest* is about the role of the Sonderkommando in the concentration camp. This part of the narrative is told by Szmul, a long-standing member of the Sonderkommando. The Sonderkommando has long been a controversial group of prisoners, by some considered collaborators, selfish creatures who helped murder their own people for a little more to eat, to prolong their own lives, and by others considered the saddest, most desolate prisoners in the camp. They received more food, but also worked in unbearable conditions and with the knowledge that they would die soon – as Geheimnisträger, secret keepers, they would not be permitted to live, having seen the inside of the gas chambers. In recent years, they have become more visible and interest in them increased, both in academia and the general public. Recent volumes by Petropoulos & Roth (2005) and Williams & Chare (2013, 2016) show the growing academic interest, while the “universal acclaim” of László Nemes’ film *Son of Saul* (2015) (metacritic.com, *Son of Saul*), testimonies that were published recently (Venezia, Bennahmias) and Martin Amis’ most recent novel, *The Zone of Interest*, show increased interest and willingness to engage with the Sonderkommando in modern culture. This chapter aims to explore how the various debates and opinions on the Sonderkommando have changed over the years. It is structured as follows: first, the various views on the Sonderkommando are discussed in a somewhat chronological order, starting with Raul Hilberg, followed by Hannah Arendt’s observations in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), and Primo Levi’s work in ‘The Grey Zone’; subsequently, the literary context of the novel is addressed, through the many elements of intertextuality; then, several important elements of the historical background against which *The Zone of Interest* is set are explored in detail, and the importance of historical context in Holocaust literature is briefly discussed; lastly, the conclusion of this chapter discusses how the intertextuality and historical references influence the reader’s view of the novel and the Sonderkommando.. Amis engages with a wide variety of authors, including William Shakespeare, Primo Levi, Leyb Langfus, Paul Celan, Hannah Arendt, Rudolf Höss, and Zygmunt Bauman, and each of these contribute to a different layer of his novel, and to a different understanding of this complicated group of prisoners.

In one of the most important historical works of the early post-war period, Hilberg's *Destruction of the European Jews* (1961), there is little mention of the Sonderkommando at all, let alone a discussion of their role and position as prisoners. At that time, however, not much was known about the Sonderkommando. Very few had survived the war, and even fewer were open about it, fearing persecution: a number of camp prisoners who had served as Kapos were prosecuted as collaborators to the Nazi regime by the Israeli court, and although no member of the Sonderkommando was ever prosecuted, they preferred to remain anonymous. Therefore, not much was known about the Sonderkommando in the early years after the war, though a few took the witness stand in war trials, which was one of the main sources of information for Hilberg, and other early historians. It is likely that they were aware of the Sonderkommando to some extent, but since none of these works focused on the prisoners and mainly attempted to reconstruct the events, they chose not to address a controversial and complicated group of prisoners.

At the Eichmann trial, too, the Sonderkommando remained in the shadows, Greif (2005) writes, as "none of them took the witness stand and the topic was not brought up" (p. 72). Nevertheless, Hannah Arendt writes on the Sonderkommando in various parts of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Her knowledge of their experience, however, as Robinson (1965) showed, appears incomplete. She writes that it is a "well-known fact that the actual work of killing in the extermination centers was usually in the hands of Jewish commandos" (2006, p. 123), but there is no evidence that the Sonderkommando ever operated the gas chambers or killed any prisoners, according to Greif (2005) and Robinson (1965). Robinson (1965) writes that Arendt's knowledge of the Sonderkommando comes primarily from Rudolf Höss' diary, which he wrote in prison. Not only would such an account of the commandant of Auschwitz be biased and aimed at minimising the part of the SS in the Holocaust, Höss also never claims that the Sonderkommando actually operates the killing centres: in the chapter 'The Gassings', he describes the work that the Sonderkommando performed, which is all "done in a matter-of-course manner, that they might themselves have been the exterminators" and he wonders where "the Jews of the Sonderkommando [derived] the strength to carry on day and night with their grisly work?" (2000, p. 152). Höss "could never get to the bottom of their behavior", although he watched them closely, but is always clear that their job was to deal with victims only just before and just after they had died - they helped undress new transports and led them into the gas chambers, and held on to the 'troublemakers', who would be shot in the back of the neck by an SS soldier (p. 160). Arendt's observations can therefore not be taken at

face value, but, like her condemnatory statements on the Jewish councils in the ghettos, these, too, sparked debate and led to some outraged reactions in (mostly German) media, taking issue with her distortion of facts and hasty judgements². However, Greif (2005) writes that Arendt “condemns them for having committed these crimes in order to escape death” (p. 57), but the context in which she makes such a statement is more nuanced than Greif (2005) makes it out to be. Arendt writes:

But if the facts of the case were now established, two more legal questions arose. First, could he be released from criminal responsibility, as Section 10 of the law under which he was tried provided, because he had done his acts “in order to save himself from the danger of immediate death”? And, second, could he plead extenuating circumstances, as Section 11 of the same law enumerated them: had he done “his best to reduce the gravity of the consequences of the offence” or “to avert the consequences more serious than those which resulted”? Clearly, Sections 10 and 11 of the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law of 1950 had been drawn up with Jewish “*collaborators*” [emphasis added] in mind. Jewish *Sonderkommando* (special units) had everywhere been employed in the actual killing process, they had committed criminal acts “in order to save themselves from immediate death,” and the Jewish Councils and Elders had cooperated because they thought they could “avert consequences worse than those which resulted.” (2006 ed., p. 91)

In this context, Arendt’s statements appear to be vastly different: in describing the law under which Eichmann was tried and the two sections that his defence could use to release him from responsibility, she places the word ‘collaborators’ in quotation marks, indicating that she does not necessarily view the *Sonderkommando* as such. She passes no judgement on their role in the war: she states that the *Sonderkommando* performed ‘criminal acts’, which, technically, they did – they assisted in the murder of thousands of people, but did so only ‘to save themselves from immediate death’, meaning they were forced and had no other choice but to obey. Nowhere in this chapter, or anywhere else in the book does she, as Greif (2005) says she does, state that “they must have joined the *Sonderkommando* for selfish reasons” (p.57). She barely mentions the *Sonderkommando* at all, and though what she knows of it is inaccurate, she does not pass explicit judgement, whereas Greif’s analysis seems to omit context from which the intentions of Arendt’s statements become clear.

Primo Levi addresses the *Sonderkommando* in chapter 2 of his book *The Drowned and the Saved*, his last publication before his suicide in 1987. In ‘The Grey Zone’, he calls them *corvi*

² Arendt’s statements got caught up in the controversy between two other Jewish authors who had written of Jewish passivity: Raul Hilberg, the author of *Destruction of the European Jews* (1961), and Bruno Bettelheim, who chastised the Frank family for hiding, as opposed to fighting (Novick 2000, p.139). Novick’s book provides a detailed analysis of Hannah Arendt’s statements and engages in great detail with the charges of saying that ‘the Jews’ cooperated that are often levied against her.

del crematorio, crematorium ravens. He first discusses privileged prisoners in the camps, whose situation was, he argues, more complex and fundamentally important for an understanding of the Lager. A system such as National Socialism, Levi observes, did not sanctify its victims, but degraded them wherever possible, and made them guilty, too (Levi 1989, p. 25). Exploring 'the grey zone', he writes, which is "studded with obscene or pathetic figures", is of vital importance to understand 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 an industrial factory" (p. 25-26). "The grey zone of 'protekcja' [privilege] and collaboration is born from multiple roots," Levi writes. The first 'root', was the fact that the Nazis needed collaborators (external auxiliaries), and therefore drew labour, forces of order and administrators of German rule from the occupied territories (and the concentration camps). The second 'root' was that due to the harshness of the oppression, the willingness of the oppressed to collaborate with the power became more widespread. Among those belonging in the grey zone, Levi names, "with different nuances of quality and weight, Quisling in Norway, the Vichy government in France, the Judenrat in Warsaw, the Saló Republic in Italy, right down to the Ukrainian and Baltic mercenaries employed elsewhere for the filthiest tasks [...] and the *Sonderkommandos*" (p. 27-28). It is clear that Levi viewed the *Sonderkommando* as collaborators, firmly situated in the space that *separates* victims and perpetrators, implying that he believes they are neither, or both at the same time. They are some of the "obscene or pathetic figures" but, Levi stresses, "it is imprudent to hasten to issue a moral judgement" (p. 28). He continues:

It must be clear that the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state, the concurrent guilt on the part of the individual big and small collaborators (never likeable, never transparent) is always difficult to evaluate. It is a judgement that we would like to entrust only to those who found themselves in similar circumstances, and had the possibility to test on themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion. [...] The condition of the offended does not exclude culpability, and this is often very serious, but I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgement. (Levi 1989, p. 28-29)

Thus, the guilt of collaborators, including the *Sonderkommando*, is difficult to evaluate and judgement of them should be reserved for those who were in similar situations, but they are culpable for their actions, Levi writes, although they cannot be tried or prosecuted by a human tribunal. This is a complex statement, and it is difficult to ascertain how exactly Levi feels about the *Sonderkommando* specifically. Because there is little source material, Levi finds it "difficult, almost impossible, to form an image for ourselves of how these men lived

day by day, saw themselves, accepted their condition” (p. 35). He is deeply troubled by the moral position of the Sonderkommando, who, according to Nyiszli, once played a game of football with the SS, who were corrupted by their duties and who cannot even claim innocence, but insists that “no one is authorised to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not live through it” (p. 42).

Greif (2005) points out a mistranslation in Rosenthal’s translation of the term Levi coined for the phenomenon of the Sonderkommando, which “defies evaluation by conventional moral standards”. Rosenthal translated ‘caso-limite di collaborazione’ as “an extreme case of collaboration” (Levi 1989, p. 34), which, according to Greif, “completely fails to capture the message of Levi’s subsequent analysis” (p.344, n. 158). The alternative translation makes more sense, too, in light of the wider concept of the grey zone: instead of ‘an extreme case of collaboration’, Greif writes that the translation ought to be ‘the borderline of collaboration’. This concept captures much better Levi’s careful conclusion that the Sonderkommando is to be regarded with pity, and not to be judged. Even with all his considerations in this chapter, it becomes clear that Levi feels incapable of understanding the plight of the Sonderkommando, and that he is deeply troubled by their complexity and position. He does not hesitate to name them collaborators, but makes clear that they are on the ‘borderline of collaboration’, at the very edge of the grey zone, and ultimately, through nuanced observations, comes to the conclusion that he cannot understand the Sonderkommando, and perhaps, that no one can. In Claude Lanzmann’s iconic 9-hour documentary *Shoah* (1985), a member of the Sonderkommando is interviewed, too. Filip Müller gives graphic descriptions of the inner workings of the gas chambers, accompanied by footage of the ruins of the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Through his descriptions, it is possible to imagine what it may have looked like, but here, Giorgio Agamben’s words ring truer than ever when he says that:

We [can] know, for example, the most minute details of how the final phase of the extermination was executed, how the deportees were led to the gas chambers by a squad of their fellow inmates (the so-called *Sonderkommando*), who then saw to it that the corpses were dragged out and washed, that their hair and gold teeth were salvaged, and that their bodies, finally, were placed in the crematoria. We can enumerate and describe each of these events, but they remain singularly opaque when we truly seek to understand them. (Agamben 2002, p. 11-12)

So while Lanzmann’s interview with Müller is relevant, because it sheds light on group of prisoners about whom not much was known, and provides personal insights and perspectives,

it remains distant, impossible to truly comprehend what they were going through and how they lived, worked, and died.

In *The Zone of Interest*, Amis treats the Sonderkommando respectfully, without the ridicule he uses to describe, for example, Paul Doll. This becomes clear in the characterisation of Szmul, the third narrator, whose voice is much more poetic, lofty and unambiguous than the other two narrators. Szmul describes the Sonderkommando and himself as “the saddest men in the Lager. And of all these very sad men I am the saddest” (Amis 2014, p. 33). His very first chapter opens with a fairy tale-like story about a magic mirror that showed you your soul – it revealed who you really were, only no one could bear to look at it, and then comes to the conclusion that Auschwitz is that mirror, except for the fact that you can’t turn away. This very explicit symbolism is very similar to Elie Wiesel’s symbolism at the end of *Night* (1958), where Wiesel looks at himself: “From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me” (p. 115)³. It is even more similar, strikingly so, to Zygmunt Bauman’s description in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). There, the Holocaust is “a window, rather than a picture on the wall, [through which] one can catch a rare glimpse of things otherwise unseen” (p.viii).

From the very beginning, Szmul is portrayed as something else, a voice of morality and conscience between the perspective of high-born opportunist Thomsen and the drunken, banal observations of camp commandant Doll. Joyce Carol Oates writes in her review for *the New Yorker* that “Szmul is a kind of saint of Auschwitz, ascetic and selfless” (Oates 2014). Moreover, in his portrayal of Szmul, Amis uses primary source material, found in *the Scrolls of Auschwitz* – Leyb Langfus’ account is quoted from directly and extensively, although without any acknowledgment (p.78-79), and, although used in a confusing and complicated manner (which is discussed in detail in chapter three), as such it becomes clear that Amis has done his very best to make Szmul as close to historically accurate as possible – if such a thing is possible at all.

The influence of Levi’s ‘The Grey Zone’ on Amis’ characterisation and treatment of Szmul is very clear. Like Levi, Amis attempts to withhold judgement of the Sonderkommando, and Szmul as a character, and as such, Reich writes in *the Washington Post* that in Szmul’s

³ In the Yiddish version of *Night*, the symbolism is still there, but the scene has a very different ending: the mirror is smashed and thus the symbolism is radically different. For a translation of the Yiddish ending, see Seidman’s “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage” (1996)

narrative, “Amis is uncharacteristically cautious and deferential, as if treading on sacred ground” (Reich 2014). Oates’ assertion that Szmul is a kind of saint in Auschwitz is further strengthened by this feat, as well as by the fact that the character does not seem to have ever done anything wrong and does not appear to have any flaws – Doll asks him if he came from “the very 1st transport out of Litzmannstadt?”, to which Szmul answers that “the 1st transport was for undesirables, sir. I was an undesirable, sir. [Because] I stole some firewood, sir. To buy turnips” (p. 128). Szmul’s worst crime, it appears, was stealing wood to buy food for his (likely starving) family.

In the first chapter, Szmul remembers a friend who used to say “*We don’t even have the comfort of innocence*” (p. 34). Here, anyone who has read ‘The Grey Zone’ will recognise Levi’s voice – he writes that “conceiving and organising the squads was National Socialism’s most demonic crime. [...] This institution represented an attempt to shift on to others – specifically the victims – the burden of guilt, so that *they were deprived of even the solace of innocence*” (Levi 1989, p. 37, emphasis added). Szmul, however, does not agree with his philosophical friend – he “would still plead not guilty”. It is clear that Szmul (and Amis, too) views the Sonderkommando as victims, and not, like Arendt or Levi, as both victim and collaborator. On *Charlie Rose*, Amis, discussing the story of the magic mirror, and that no one could look at it, said that this was:

“Well, because you don’t normally see more than five percent of anyone – yourself included. And quite right that you shouldn’t [...] But in an atrocity producing situation like Auschwitz, you see the rest of the 95 percent and everyone describes the experience as one of staggering surprise. As a perpetrator you find that you can do it or you like it, as a victim you find enormous strength in yourself[,] and the voices of survivors are of such a high level of perception and wisdom and aphorism that makes you, convinces you that what helped you survive was force of life. You had to have other things. Immunity to despair, constantly cherishing your sense of innocence was [inaudible] [...] and Szmul, of course, can’t even do that, because he doesn’t feel innocent.” (Amis on Charlie Rose, 2014)

So although Szmul does not, according to Amis, feel innocent – “the Sonderkommando has suffered Seelenmord, death of the soul” – Szmul thinks (Amis 2014, p. 201), his guilt appears to be on a more fundamental level, and can be judged, as Levi phrases it, by “no human tribunal” (Levi 1989, p. 29). In that, although Szmul (and Amis) at first appear to disagree with Levi’s view on the Sonderkommando, his views are repeatedly reflected throughout the novel, although, as Franklin writes in her review for *The New York Times*, “[the novel] offers no new insights into questions that [writers like Levi, Celan and Rousset] have more thoughtfully examined.”

The novel's references to Hannah Arendt's concept of 'the banality of evil' are more complicated, and appear to be of a more subversive nature, which will be discussed in some detail in chapter three. Amis dismisses Arendt on this topic, saying that although she was obviously very clever, "she proved herself to be the worst court reporter of all time because she absolutely seemed to fall for Eichmann's self-exoneration when he said that 'I'm just a gray bureaucrat following orders'" (Amis on Charlie Rose, 2014), and prefers Robert Jay Lifton's interpretation, whom he paraphrases as follows: "they may have been banal when they started, and I'm sure there's a lot of truth in that. But once they started killing and producing - in an atrocity-producing situation, they weren't banal anymore" (Amis on Charlie Rose, 2014).

The character of Paul Doll, too, places an unusually large emphasis on normality; even as he descends into madness over the course of the novel - he stresses multiple times that he is "a normal man with normal needs. [...] This is what nobody seems to understand. Paul Doll is completely normal" (p. 32). The character is based on the autobiography of Rudolf Höss, published in Polish in 1946, brought out in English in 1959 and republished in 2000. The similarities between the two characters are striking - most of Höss' life experiences were directly transferred to Doll's, from the prison sentence for murder, for which they both went to jail (Amis (2014) p. 217; Höss (2000) p. 44), to the Iron Cross (second and first class) decorations (Amis p. 116; Höss p. 38n), military service on the Iraqi front and becoming the youngest non-commissioned officer at the age of 17 (Amis p. 59; Höss p. 36, 40), and even the distance between him and his wife (Amis p. 117; Höss p. 63). Contrary to Doll, who, regardless of his own insistence that he is 'completely normal', is clearly not at all normal, Höss was assessed by Gustave Gilbert, and considered "intellectually normal", although he did have several traits that "could hardly be more extreme in a frank psychotic" (Gilbert 1995, p. 260). Doll, on the other hand, is shown to descend into madness, alcoholism and paranoia over the course of the book and attempts to have his wife murdered, neither of which Höss experienced - in his autobiography, he tried to protect his wife by writing that she never knew about his work, something now known to be a lie.

In the preface to Höss' autobiography, Primo Levi writes that "it is the autobiography of a man who was not a monster and who never became one, even at the height of his career

in Auschwitz. [...] [He] may have been one of the worst criminals of all time, but his makeup was not dissimilar from that of any citizen in any country" (p. 3-4), which reflects on the fact that Höss was, above all, a product of his circumstances who would have likely "wound up as some sort of drab functionary," in a different climate (p. 1). Instead, he became one of the biggest criminals in history. In emphasising how 'normal' Höss was, Levi does not attempt to forgive him, or to exonerate any of his crimes. What he does do, is make readers realise that Höss was like them, too. In *Liquid Fear*, Zygmunt Bauman explores this uncomfortable, terrifying realisation in great detail, and comes to the conclusion that:

The most terrifying lesson of Auschwitz, the Gulag, Hiroshima is that contrary to the view commonly held, though each time held in a partisan way, it is not only monsters who commit monstrous crimes; and it that if it were only monsters who did, the most monstrous and terrifying of crimes would not have happened. [...]

The most morally devastating lesson of Auschwitz or the Gulag or Hiroshima is not that we could be put behind bars or herded into gas chambers, but that (under the right conditions), we could stand on guard and sprinkle white crystals into chimney ducts; and not that an atomic bomb could be dropped on *our* heads, but that (under the right conditions) *we* could drop it on other people's heads. [...]

Eichmann's victims were 'people like us'. But so were – perish the thought – many of Eichmann's executors, their slaughterers; and Eichmann? Both ooze fear. But while the first thought is a call to action, the second disables and incapacitates. [...] One fear that is genuinely and hopelessly unbearable is the fear of the invincibility of evil. (Bauman 2006, p. 66-67).

Thus, the set of circumstances made monsters of ordinary people, and vice versa. All participants were, at first, normal people, from the very first victim to the worst executioner or the commandant of Auschwitz, but a poisonous concoction of chance and political intent caused the death of millions of people, and it becomes clear that in such circumstances "there is no doubt, every one of us can, potentially, become a monster"⁴ (Levi⁵, qtd. in Bauman 2006,

⁴ Studies like the Milgram experiment (1963), where ordinary people are told they have to administer electric shocks of increasing voltage to a 'victim' as punishment, in the context of a learning experiment. Results show that "the procedure created extreme levels of nervous tension in some [subjects]" (Milgram 1963, p 371), but that of the 40 subjects, 26 fully obeyed all commands and administered the highest level of electricity, and that 14 stopped the experiment at some point, but each of the subjects went beyond the expected break-off point, and none stopped before administering 300 volts, when the 'victim' protests his treatment, when 5 stopped (p.371). Milgram's experiment was inspired by Eichmann's statement that he was "just following orders."

⁵ Bauman's reference is very unclear, referring to Todorov's *Hope and Memory*, rather than Levi's book. Levi's "book-long last will and testament," as Bauman precedes this quotation, is generally considered to be *The Drowned and the Saved*, but the quote cannot be found there. In Todorov, the quote can be found on p. 180 of the 2003 English translation, and refers to Levi's *Conversazioni*, p. 250. Considering the academic prestige of both Bauman and Todorov, and because Levi is known to have written similar things, the author, who does not speak Italian, assumes that this quotation is thus correct.

p. 67). The circumstances of the Holocaust were, as LaCapra (1998) phrases it, “both unique and comparable. At the same time, it was neither unique nor comparable, for there is a sense in which comparatives are irrelevant, and even superlatives are questionable except perhaps as hyperbolic expressions of one’s own inadequacy in trying to come to terms with problems” (p. 6).

In the epigraph, Amis quotes two passages from Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*, which provide a background against which the novel is read. The first passage that Amis quotes describes the three witches brewing a potion to create a charm, using only the most poisonous of ingredients, with which they give Macbeth the visions in answer to his questions. After seeing these visions, Macbeth moves to kill Macduff’s family. The novel is thus read against a very clear background of the poisonous mixture that contributed to Macbeth’s doom. In the novel, we see three narrators up close, who are each changed by the concentration camps in their own way. Only one of them, Thomsen, comes out of the zone of interest alive and is thus able to reflect on the difference clearly: “In the Kat Zet, like every perpetrator, I felt doubled (this is me but it is also not me; there is a further me); after the war, I felt halved” (Amis 2014, p. 285). He continues:

Under National Socialism you looked in the mirror and saw your soul. You found yourself out. This applied, *par excellence* and *a fortiori* (by many magnitudes), to the victims, or to those who lived for more than an hour and had time to confront their own reflections. And yet it also applied to everyone else, the malefactors, the collaborators, the witnesses, the conspirators, the outright martyrs (Red Orchestra, White Rose, the men and women of July 20), and even the minor obstructors, like me, and like Hannah Doll. We all discovered, or helplessly revealed, who we really were. (p. 285).

Thomsen makes it clear that this process of ‘finding yourself out’ is not voluntary. Szmul, who says almost the same, focuses on the concentration camps which have that effect, while Thomsen extends that metaphor to the entire society under National Socialism and all people living under it, essentially stressing that it was not just the concentration camp universe that was the ‘poisonous brew’, but that the entire society was, too.

During Thomsen’s visit to Berlin, he meets with a professor Konrad Peters, first by teletype and telephone from the camp, then in person in Berlin. Peters is “an old friend of my father’s in Berlin, Konrad Peters of the SD – the Sicherheitsdienst. Peters was formerly a professor of modern history at Humboldt; now he helped monitor foes of National Socialism”

(Amis 2014, p. 147-48), but, although it is unsure how Thomsen knows this, he is also an “obstruktive Mitlaufer”, someone who goes along with the regime, but does whatever possible to drag their feet. Initially, Thomsen uses Peters to find out about Dieter Kruger’s fate at Hannah’s request, but when they meet face to face in chapter 6, on March 29 in the Tiergarten, their discussion turns in a whole different direction, addressing the *Endlösung* as ‘the crime without a name’, and talking of the German government as ‘they’, and assert that “they know they’ve lost” (p. 247), although Hitler won’t stop “until Berlin looks like Stalingrad” (p. 248).

Both Thomsen and Peters “wonder at the industrial nature of [the *Endlösung*], the modernity of it,” and emphasise that the gas chambers were not necessary, but useful to *economise* the process, even though bullets and pyres would have done the job, since “they had the will” (p. 246). When Thomsen asks what happened to give people that will, Peters suggests that it is a consequence of a society that rewards cruelty like any other virtue, and that the ‘crime without a name’ is the consequence of modernity “even futuristic, [...] mixed with something incredibly ancient” (p.247).

In Thomsen’s conversation with Peters, Amis’ references to Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) are abundant. Bauman argues that the Holocaust was a consequence of modern times, rather than a failure of it. He writes that “it is an error to imagine that civilization and savage cruelty are antithesis [...] Both creation and destruction are inseparable aspects of what we call civilization” (p. 9). Bauman blames “the spirit of instrumental rationality, and its modern, bureaucratic form of institutionalization” for making the Holocaust possible and reasonable, because, as he writes, “of the ability of modern bureaucracy to co-ordinate the action of great number of moral individuals in pursuit of any, also immoral, ends” (p. 18). At its core, reviewer Alex Preston observes, *the Zone of Interest* seeks to demonstrate how bureaucracy is intrinsically capable of genocidal action (Preston, *the Guardian*, 2014). Amis shows this not only in Thomsen’s conversation with Konrad Peters, but also in his meetings with IG Farben officials, who speak only of business, and who “daintily pick[ed] their way past the bodies of the wounded, the unconscious, the dead” (Amis 2014, p. 88), and who discuss the ‘expiration date’ of their workers with annoyance, because they have to induct new workers every three months. It appears in the way Paul Doll responds with exasperation at the announcement that KZ III will be built – not at the deaths of many more people, but of the difficulty it will cause him to manage the process.

In the second part of the epigraph, Amis again quotes Macbeth, speaking in Act III, where he comes to the conclusion that it would be equally hard to go back to being a good person, after the murders he has committed, than to continue killing: it is incredibly hard to return to normalcy, once a certain point is passed:

I am in blood
Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
(*Macbeth*, 3.4.135-137)

Someone like Rudolf Höss, or any other officer working in a the Nazi regime or in a concentration camp, may not have been a monster or a sadist, and may not have enjoyed killing or inflicting pain, but leaving the 'death machine' would have been difficult, because as part of the Nazi machine, he was re-educated and as such, learned to like the power and esteem that came with the position he occupied. Levi writes about Höss that:

He was not lying when he repeatedly maintain[ed] that once he entered the Nazi machine it was difficult to get out. He would certainly not have been risking death, or even a severe punishment, but leaving would indeed have been difficult. Life in the SS involved a skilful and intense 'reeducation' [sic] that fed the ambition of the recruits, who, mostly uneducated and frustrated outcasts, felt their self-esteem thus boosted and exalted. (Levi (1985), Preface in Höss 1996, p. 5)

So while it may not have been particularly dangerous for someone to leave the SS or request a transfer away from the camps, the training that recruits underwent boosted their self-esteem and made the 'outcasts' into important people. Leaving that position was, as such, undesirable because it involved loss of wealth, status and uniform.

Another interpretation of the *Macbeth* quote is shown in the novel, when Paul Doll insists that "[they] can't stop now," because otherwise everything done before will have been useless. "Or what were we doing, what did we think we were about, over the last two years?" Doll wonders (Amis 2014, p. 229). With this quotation in mind, Shakespeare's quote has a whole different meaning - namely that now that the Final Solution is underway, there is no going back, so it would be just as easy to continue killing. Germany is, once again, fighting two, even three wars at the same time: the "Anglo-Saxons" at the western front, and the Soviets in the east. According to Sebastian Haffner (1979), Hitler realised on 6 December 1941, when the attacks on Moscow failed and were called off, that "from this point of culmination onwards ... no victory could any longer be won" (p. 116). He explains Hitler's declaration of

war on America as “an invitation to wage war against Germany” (p. 117) – if the war was lost, the defeat had to be “as complete and disastrous as possible” (p. 117). However, the third war, the war against the Jews had been taking place all across Europe for nearly a decade already, and could still be won. Indeed, Jews could not defend themselves and the victory was merely a matter of time and dedication before the Final Solution would have been completed. But the victims, too, and especially the members of the Sonderkommando, were “in blood”, so far, drenched in the poisonous environment of the camps, that there was virtually no going back.

The Zone of Interest is a novel thoroughly grounded in intertextual references, as demonstrated above, but in order to realistically set the scene and create a realistic narrative, references to real-life historical events, people and places are more important. However, in literature concerning the Holocaust, historical context is more problematic than it would be for a novel set in almost any other time and place. This idea will be discussed in more detail in chapter three when the discussion turns to the notion of writing fiction about the Holocaust, but it is briefly addressed here, as well, to illustrate how some of the changes Amis made affect a reading of the novel. Historical fiction about the Holocaust brings back the question whether, as Ruth Kluger argues, “books and films with the Holocaust as a background are more restricted in what they may invent than other [novels] that lean heavily on historical background” (Kluger 2013, 402). In many other historical novels, authors can take many liberties with the historical record in order to make it suit their narrative without receiving a great deal of criticism, but with Holocaust novels, this is not the case, and authors of Holocaust novels (such as John Boyne or, indeed, Martin Amis with *Time’s Arrow*) are criticised harshly for changing the ‘historical truth’, or experimenting with the form and order. In *The Zone of Interest*, Amis has stuck to conventions, employing very little “linguistic razzle-dazzle, few post-modern *jeux*” – which are all characteristics associated with his previous work, including *Time’s Arrow* (1991), which narrates the life of a Nazi doctor backwards, causing an interesting reversal in the purpose of the camps.

The first page of the novel, which describes Hannah Doll walking into the zone of interest, has no allusions to a concentration camp: according to Cynthia Ozick (2014), the ‘Old Town’ that Hannah comes from “might be anywhere in the old world of romantic allusiveness”. This perception is quickly shattered in the following pages, and as the novel

progresses, references are made to the Eastern front and the battle at Stalingrad, as well as the battles in Egypt against the British and the declaration of war to the United States, although there is not so much historical context given to the developments of the Holocaust itself – there is only the occasional reference to the ghettos in Poland, and, of course, the establishment of Auschwitz (III). Most of the more explicit references deal with well-known, major turning points in the war, people who were involved in running the camp or the government, or were simply exploiting the free labour. Many of the characters outside the main characters (Hannah Doll, Thomsen, and Szmul – the exception is Paul Doll, based on Rudolf Höss) are named for and based on real people who worked in and around the camp, although names have been changed: Ilse Grese is based on the infamous Irma Grese, guard at Auschwitz, called ‘The Beautiful Beast’, who was hanged at age 22, the youngest of any Nazi war criminals; Thomsen’s aunt and uncle, Gerda and Martin Bormann, were real people; the characters who work for IG Farben are also based on real people, but these are not easily traceable and not particularly relevant. What is more relevant and interesting, is the way Amis treats IG Farben in the novel, how he addresses the war effort, and how the main evil remains unnamed – elaborate nicknames and circumlocutions are used to describe Adolf Hitler, and he is only named in the last section of the book.

In ‘Acknowledgements and Aftermath’, Amis writes that “he has so far gone unnamed in this book; but now I am obliged to type out the words ‘Adolf Hitler’. And he seems slightly more manageable, somehow, when escorted by quotation marks” (Amis 2014, p. 305). He does not explain why he has not named Hitler, but it is strongly implied that, if he is named, he should be understood, and because “of mainstream historians, not one claims to understand him, and many make a point of saying they don’t” (p. 306). It is also possible that by not naming the main orchestrator of the war and the *Endlösung*, Amis wanted to keep the focus on the executioners, the business officials and the common people, and their responsibility in the genocide. Had Amis named Hitler and made him a bigger character than the shadow looming in the background, it would have been much easier to place responsibility with him, as opposed to with many, many others, as well – with officers within the SS, but also with civilians working for companies that used slave labour in the many Auschwitz sub-camps, or with the management of companies like IG Farben.

IG Farben was founded in December 1925, and grew to employ over 200,000 people in 1938, the third biggest company in Germany at the time, and the biggest in the chemical industry, according to Martin Fiedler (1999). In the early years of the war, IG Farben acquired

various chemical plants in Czechoslovakia and Poland, many using concentration camp prisoners to supply their factories with cheap labour. The most famous IG Farben plant was the Buna-Werke, a rubber factory located a short distance away from Auschwitz concentration camp. After an outbreak of typhus in the main camp, which would likely have strongly reduced the workforce at Buna, factory management came to an agreement to build another sub-camp in the village of Monowice, to house the slave-labourers separately from the 'regular' prisoners. This new concentration camp became known as Auschwitz (III) Monowitz, and was financed entirely by IG Farben. In the novel, IG Farben's role in funding the camp is made abundantly clear. The uncaring business interest of the Farben officials is also chillingly obvious, because what Suitbert Seedig is worried about is not necessarily the state of the prisoners as much as the amount of work they can do in such a state. Therefore, Burckl, one of the business officials, argues for a 20% increase of rations, which is shot down immediately by both Doll and Thomsen. Moreover, IG Farben officials represent the industry's lack of concern for human life, moral responsibility and ethical labour. By referring to IG Farben so explicitly and frequently as Amis does, he puts the focus on how easily 'normal' people – business men, engineers, designers – can put aside the horrors of the dead and dying amongst them, if they do not feel responsible in some way, and how they contribute to the genocide in that way. In 1944, the Allied forces bombed the Buna factory four times, and in January 1945, the prisoners fit enough to walk were sent on a death march to evacuate the camp.

References to important turning points in the war are mentioned throughout the novel. Set between August 1942 and April 1943, the events of *The Zone of Interest* happen simultaneously with the Battle of Stalingrad, the battles of El Alamein in Egypt, America's involvement in the war, and the first German losses. Any reader will have the benefit of hindsight regarding the outcome of the battles, America's role and the end of the war. As such, the discussions of the war effort between the officers at the concentration camps are thick with irony, specifically aimed at the reader. Some of the characters are more convinced of the 'certain German victory' than others – whereas Thomsen, his friend Boris, Hannah Doll and Konrad Peters are aware of the potential, and later, near-certain German defeat, Paul Doll remains wilfully ignorant on the matter. Mentions of Stalingrad are particularly ironic and humorous for the reader – the Battle of Stalingrad is – along with the battle of El Alamein – generally considered the major turning point in the war, as it was the largest and bloodiest battles in history with millions of soldiers and civilians killed, wounded or captured, and the first defeat of Hitler's armies. As the battle progresses and the defeat comes closer and closer,

Doll's optimism and stubborn determination become more desperate and ironic. Because Doll will not admit that the German army can lose, his subordinates lie to him in an attempt to appease him: Prufer convinces him that even though all the odds are against the German army, "these difficulties are as nothing," because "victory is not in doubt. It'll just take a bit longer, that's all" (Amis 2014, p. 188).

A historical reference that is treated with anything but irony is when Szmul relates the time of the Silent Boys – when the number of victims was so high, that 100 teenage boys were selected to help the Sonderkommando with their duties, naked, without food or water, and without making a sound. After their task was finished, they were killed one by one by the SS, again without a sound. In the novel, Szmul's sons were among the silent boys – they had been taken to Chelmno with their father, under the impression that they would work in Germany (Amis 2014, p 203-204). This scene was inspired by a passage from Gilbert's *The Holocaust* (1986), where Rudolf Reder, one of the two survivors of Belzec extermination camps, recalls the very same scene (p. 509). Although the location of this horrifying event is changed from Belzec to Chelmno for uncertain and irrelevant reasons, Amis narrates it with heartbreaking clarity and none of the black humour or irony that laces some of the other references.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the discussions about the Sonderkommando have changed significantly over time – from virtually non-existent in the first years after the war, to the somewhat misinformed discussion of Hannah Arendt in the early 1960s and the insightful observations of Primo Levi in the 1980s. Moreover, popular and academic interest in this group of prisoners has grown significantly in recent years, as shown by the critical success of Laszlo Nemes' feature film *Son of Saul* (2015), and the ongoing and recently published research on the Sonderkommando by, among others Chare & Williams (2013; 2016) and the fairly recent translation of Gideon Greif's 1999 volume *We Wept Without Tears* (2005). With *The Zone of Interest*, Amis provides an interesting literary insight into the Sonderkommando's plight and their characters. He does so with countless allusions to other writers, historical events and actual people involved in the concentration camp universe – some of these opaque and disguised, others clearly stated to the knowing eye. Intertextual references varied from Shakespeare, whose passages from *Macbeth* provide a fresh eye to the entire novel, to Bauman and his views of the causal relationship between modernity, bureaucracy and the Holocaust, to Levi, whose essay 'The Grey Zone' strongly shaped Szmul's character. The many historical events that Amis includes are mostly references to the war effort and attempt to show Germany's decline and the characters' response to that fact,

but they also invoke some important questions about historical fiction and the Holocaust. These questions are addressed in chapter three, when the role of testimony in history and literature is discussed and issues of fictional writing about the Holocaust are considered. In the next chapter, however, the focus shifts to the four main characters, who, after a short introduction of liminality and its synonymy to Levi's grey zone, are discussed in great detail, and whose liminal characteristics are analysed and questioned.

Chapter 2: Liminality, the Grey Zone and the Characters in *the Zone of Interest*

The title of *The Zone of Interest* comes from the German word *Interessengebiet*, the area around a concentration camp. At most concentration camp sites, the surrounding areas were cleared of its native inhabitants. Dachau, which opened in March 1933, only two months after Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, was relatively small, occupying approximately 2 hectares, while the surrounding area, used for SS barracks, factories and other facilities, occupied around 8 hectares (0,08 km²). At Auschwitz, which opened in 1940, and was at its peak capacity in 1944, this area spanned around 40 km², which is bigger than, for example, the Greek capitol of Athens (39 km² with 665,000 inhabitants in 2014 (worldpopulationreview.com)). The zone of interest was surrounded by a double ring of barbed wire and electrical fences and guarded with watchtowers (Steinbacher 2004, p. 25). It is this zone that Amis decided to name his novel after and it is here that he sets his main scenes of action, deep within the zone of interest, although outside of the camps. The title can also be read, by those unfamiliar with the term *Interessengebiet*, as a nod to Primo Levi's essay "the Grey Zone", which explores the 'zone' in which various people operate between life and death, good and evil, being a victim and a perpetrator. This concept is known in anthropology and religious studies as 'liminality'. In this chapter, the concept of liminality is further explored and its uses in literary and Holocaust studies discussed. It is then compared with Levi's observations in "the Grey Zone", showing that 'liminality' and 'the grey zone' are similar, even synonymous in many aspects, but that there are also some differences. Subsequently, the characters of Amis' novel are discussed and their position in the 'grey zone' is analysed. Living and working in the zone of interest, each of the characters also inhabits the grey zone in some aspect, although they are in very different situations, and this chapter analyses how the actions and motivations can be called 'liminal'. Central in each discussion is how these aspects of the novel link back to the concept of liminality, and if and how the character is in a 'grey zone'.

The concept of liminality and liminal rites was introduced by the French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957). In his 1908 publication *Rites de Passage* (translated in 1960) he explores his vision on rites of passage, which he divides in three sub categories: *rites of separation*, or preliminal rites, which are mainly performed in funeral ceremonies; *transition rites*, or liminal rites, which are performed during pregnancy, betrothal

and initiation; and *rites of incorporation*, or post-liminal rites, which are performed in marriage ceremonies (van Gennep 1960, p. 11). Van Gennep's categories are not fixed, he emphasises, and they can be elaborated to the extent that the liminal period reduplicates the three stages within a single ceremony. This liminal period, in which a person goes from one stage – in life or in a ritual⁶ – to the next, was elaborated on by the British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983). He focused on the liminal phase in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), and modified this into the concept 'liminality', which he considered to be a middle state that was ambiguous or even paradoxical (qtd. in Ashley, p. xviii). The attributes of liminality are always ambiguous, because "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (Turner 1969, p. 95). Moreover, they may be represented as possessing nothing, to demonstrate that "as liminal being they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system – in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands" (p. 95). Whilst in the liminal stage, those undergoing the ritual find themselves in a limbo, where they are no longer a part of the society they were in before the ritual, but are not yet re-incorporated in the next phase of that society. In this liminal phase, people are vulnerable, and Turner describes their behaviour as "passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life" (p. 95). With this description of liminal entities, it seems no stretch to view the prisoners of the concentration camps as liminal personae. However, in the context of the Holocaust, liminality takes on different, more literal dimensions, specifically in concentration camp narratives, both fictional and testimonial (although these are not mutually exclusive). The victims are caught in a transitional phase, but as mentioned above, not between two phases of life, but rather between life and death, and in some cases, between victim and perpetrator. Those who hover in the transitional phase between victim and perpetrator belong, at the same time, to both and neither category. An understanding of the concept of liminality may contribute to a better understanding of victims' position, but has its limitations, because it was not originally designed to deal with people,

⁶ An example of a present-day 'ritual' with a clear, prolonged liminal phase can be found in most nations' armies. The cadets are shorn and stripped of their personal belongings and trained to follow orders immediately and without question. During this period of training, they are no longer 'civilians', but are not yet 'soldiers', either, and are thus in a transitional phase.

but with rituals happening to people, and it is clear that what happened in the concentration camps was in no way akin to a ritual. Therefore, in order to use the concept of liminality in the context of the Holocaust, the definition has to be specified slightly to reflect the complexity of the issue, as well as the multiple aspects that can be considered liminal. In order to adequately specify these aspects, Primo Levi's essay "The Grey Zone" is discussed and the similarities and differences between Turner's term 'liminality' and Levi's use of 'the grey zone' are compared, although they are used interchangeably and considered synonymous.

The 'grey zone' is Primo Levi's attempt to define a state of being in which some of the more 'privileged' prisoners existed, as well as a dilemma which many faced, for which he knew no fitting term. Levi defined it as "the hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary [...] with ill-defined borders which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants" (Levi 1989, p. 27). Liminality, when used in a different context than that of a ritual or religious ceremony, is in many ways a synonym of the 'grey zone'. It represents the state of suspension in which many prisoners found themselves, hovering between life and death – their old life, before their deportation, was exchanged for a 'life' spent working towards death. What 'liminality' does *not* necessarily represent, on the other hand, is the moral and ethical dilemma that Levi discusses in 'The Grey Zone', where prisoners, who were already in that liminal state between life and death, are also hovering somewhere between victim and perpetrator because they were privileged in some way, because they assisted the Nazis in running the camp in some way. This way, they were not only in a liminal state between life and death, but also between victim and perpetrator. Levi's concept of this is most accurately described by the kapos (block leaders), administrative clerks who helped run the camp, or, indeed, the Sonderkommando, although one hesitates to speak of privilege there (Levi 1989, p. 34). Turner's 'liminality' does not exactly account for a moral and ethical dilemma which the Sonderkommando faced, because when one hovers between being a victim or a perpetrator, they are not in a transitional state. The state of suspension that liminality does cover has a start and an ending – the majority of those who entered the camp and found themselves in the liminal stage between life and death, passed through to the end of the 'ritual' – death. Very few escaped that fate and did so, as Jorge Semprún puts it, not by surviving it, but by crossing through it, "from one end to the other" (Semprún 1995, p. 15). The members of the Sonderkommando, though also in a liminal state, never become part of one or the other category. There was no 'ritual' to be finished, as though the prisoners started as victims and eventually became perpetrators, which was never the case. In this thesis, the concepts of

'liminality' and 'the grey zone' are – for the sake of clarity – used synonymously, even though there is a slight difference in their specific definition.

Each of these terms is an obvious simplification of the reality, but part of our understanding of the world, and of the Holocaust, is there because of the simplification of reality. "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" (Levi 1989, p. 22). With the 'grey zone', Levi attempts to 'recomplicate' the knowledge of the concentration camps and the people in it, and yet make it comprehensible all the same. He asserts that although "the need to divide the field into 'we' and 'they' is so strong that this pattern [...] prevails over all others", and that desire to simplify is justified, the simplification itself is not. "The network of human relationships inside the Lagers was not simple: it could not be reduced to the two blocks of victims and persecutors" (p. 22-23).

The four main characters in Amis's novel are considered in light of this observation, and can be considered liminal characters, even though none of them are really worked out in detail. They remain at the surface, to an archetypal and almost stereotypical extent – various reviewers criticised the lack of depth of Amis' characters, especially Paul Doll, who is "a miserable parody of a Nazi murderer" (Cheuse 2014). In this novel, however, the characters are not the primary focus: the story is – when read against the passages from Macbeth, cited in the epigraph, it becomes clear that the novel aims to show how various kinds of people respond to a poisonous concoction of circumstances, rather than focusing on the characters themselves in great detail.

In many ways, all of the characters find themselves in a liminal position in the Kat Zet, since they are all involved in the death factory in one way or another, and respond to this in various ways, depending on their position or role within the camps and the zone of interest. The four major characters in this novel – Paul and Hannah Doll, Angelus Thomsen and Szmul Zachariasz – are all in different places in the grey zone between victim and perpetrator and 'good' and 'evil'. The discussion of these characters focuses on their behaviour in the novel, how they can be considered liminal characters, and where they fall in the grey zone between victim and perpetrator. Additionally, it will be discussed what function the characters have in the novel and how Martin Amis uses them to serve his story.

Paul Doll is first introduced as 'the Old Boozer', when Thomsen and his friend Boris discuss his wife Hannah, creating a negative opinion of him from the very start. As the commandant of the KZ, it is clear that he is the antagonist of the novel. Doll's own narrative starts when he receives confirmation that a new sub-camp will be built, which will be paid for and administered by IG Farben. The main source of conflict in his narrative, however, is the fact that he is losing the respect of his subordinates and superiors because he no longer deals with the transports well, but also because he cannot control (or blackmail) his wife anymore using threats to her former lover after she uses Thomsen to find out that he has been dead for a long time. When ordered by the Gestapo to get his wife under control after she behaves disrespectfully towards the Nazi government and Hitler, he attempts to solve this problem by having her murdered and forces Szmul to do so. Running throughout this narrative is an undercurrent of a Paul Doll getting more and more paranoid – from thinking Hannah is still in contact with her lover to thinking she has an affair, or that everyone in the camp is working to see him fired and humiliated – and dependent on alcohol to do his job. It is this obvious mental deterioration that shows that Paul Doll is not the personification of Death or the Devil – even if Szmul thinks that (p. 137). There are a number of scenes in Doll's narrative that are important to analyse to get an idea of the various aspects of his character. First, Doll's insistent claim of normality is discussed alongside his growing paranoia, mental instability and alcoholism – this is then linked to liminality and the liminal aspect of Doll's character. Then, Doll's relationship with Hannah, and his eventual decision to kill her is discussed, it is then connected to Doll's view on women and the language he uses, which is laced with German fillers (without umlauts), and at times unnecessarily coarse.

The very first thing that is mentioned about Paul Doll is his alcoholic tendencies – from his nickname 'the Old Boozer' to the way he drinks his brandy: "He drank, as if for thirst, and poured again" (Amis 2014, p. 17). The reason for this desperate thirst for alcohol was, it becomes clear, the daily arrival of transports. During other transports and duties in the camp, too, he is seen drinking by the other narrators and as such, it might be assumed that Doll feels as though he cannot do his job without the numbing effects of alcohol during and after work, because he is troubled by the nature of it. This becomes clear from the way in which Doll reflects on the arrival and 'processing' of Special Transport 105 in the first chapter, after he has given a 'welcome speech' to the new arrivals:

And I was thinking, Why isn't it always like this? And it would be, if I had my way. A comfortable journey followed by a friendly and dignified reception. What needed we,

really, of the crashing doors of those boxcars, the blazing arc lights, the terrible yelling ('*Out! Get out! Quick! Faster! FASTER!*'), the dogs, the truncheons, and the whips? And how civilised the KL looked in the thickening glow of dusk, and how richly the birches glistened. (Amis 2014, p. 25)

From this passage, it becomes clear that Doll does not enjoy violence, and that he does not necessarily agree with it, either. However, as he later admits, he this is impossible due to the cost of the transports, and, as he reiterates multiple times, he *does* agree with those.

Even though others characters, including Thomsen, Szmul, Hannah, and some of Doll's colleagues, are very much aware of Doll's apparent mental instability – arguing, as professor Entress does, that he no longer does his job well enough – Doll himself does not appear to realise his own downward spiral into alcoholism, as he repeats several times that he "is completely normal" (p.32), and that he is a normal man with normal needs. However, at the same time, he seemingly finds these 'normal needs' to be an example of 'human weakness', and whenever he is 'tempted by human weakness' – whether it's feeling sorry for his victims or when he wants to have sex with his wife – Doll asserts that "[he] simply think[s] of Germany, and of the trust reposed in me by her deliverer – whose visions, whose ideals and aspirations, I unshakably share. To be kind to the Jew is to be cruel to the German" (Amis 2014, p. 65), indicating that he feels as though he is protecting the German people. However, the fact that Doll apparently feels the need to state explicitly that he shares the ideals of the 'Deliverer' implies that perhaps he needs to convince himself of this 'unshakeable' loyalty. He asserts several times that:

'Right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad': these concepts have had their time; they are gone. Under the new order, some deeds have positive outcomes and some deeds have negative outcomes. And that is all. (p. 65)

Even though Doll says he wholeheartedly believes in what he is doing, in his penultimate chapter, titled 'Night Logic', he reflects, nevertheless, on the time when he drunkenly doubted the morality of the things they do: "If what we're doing is good, why does it smell so lancingly bad? On the ramp at night, why do we feel the ungainsayable need to get so brutishly drunk?" (p. 222). He then continues:

The questions I asked myself on the Reich Day of Mourning: *they must never recur.*

I must shut down a certain zone in my mind

I must accept that we have mobilised the weapons, the wonder weapons, of darkness.

And I must take to my heart the potencies of death.

In any case, as we've always made clear, the Christian system of right and wrong, of good and bad is 1 we categorically reject. Such values – relics of medieval barbarism – no longer apply. There are only positive outcomes and negative outcomes. (p. 223)

Even if Doll is convinced that exterminating the Jews is the way to go forward, this suggests that he does have a conflicted conscience, and, in order to continue, he needs to convince himself that 'right' and 'wrong' no longer exist, but doesn't really appear to believe it. This belief is consistent with an important part of Nietzsche's philosophy and his views concerning religious morality and the fact that 'God is dead', by which he means to say that Christian morality, upon which modern society is built, and the concepts of good and evil no longer have the same hold on society, and that as such, the old value system should be rejected to allow mankind to live their lives to the full (Weeks 2014, p. 81).

Doll's complicated, loveless marriage contributes to his growing mental instability because it feeds into his paranoia; he suspects Hannah of an extramarital affair – at first with Thomsen, and then, by a strange twist of logic, with her former lover Dieter Kruger, even though he has, at that time, been dead for almost 10 years. Doll's marriage to Hannah appears to have been loveless from the very start – Doll remembers that "Hannah's frigidity unmasked itself fairly early on in our marriage" (p. 116), that they became virtual strangers after the twins were born, and that Hannah remained unresponsive to his advances – the only way he could convince her to sleep with him was by threatening the safety of Dieter Kruger. When Doll first discovers that Hannah has been in contact with Thomsen, he has a prisoner follow him to find out how they are involved, and takes to spying on Hannah while she is in the bathroom. After he confronts his wife with her supposed infidelity, she tells him that she used Thomsen to find out about her former lover's fate, which Doll, clearly, had not expected; he then comes to the conclusion that she has been defiant because Kruger is still alive, and plans to "go back to my old MO: threatening to kill him" (p. 172). But, because Hannah knows from Thomsen that Kruger is dead, this does not work and Hannah behaves even more blatantly obstructive – which people notice and ask questions, demanding that he control his wife, causing Doll to retaliate against her and attempt to have her killed.

It is this paranoia and the presence of even the slightest tinge of doubt, as well as the need to calm his nerves and sedate his senses with alcohol, even though it is well hidden, that makes Doll a more multidimensional, liminal character. More than the ultimate evil that is represented by 'the Deliverer', Doll's character appears to have a conscience causing him headaches, which he buries with 'reasoning', alcohol and painkillers. Stuck between his

conscience and his loyalty, unsure how to act and who to trust, he is a 'victim' of his own mind, driven to madness and paranoia, which is worsened by alcohol. In this context, the word 'victim' is naturally incompatible with the status of concentration camp prisoners such as Szmul, Alisz or Esther, or, indeed, his wife Hannah, who suffered years of psychological abuse and manipulation at the hands of her husband. Where these four can be somewhat grouped together is that they are all victims of something other than themselves whereas Doll, as mentioned, is not. Later in this chapter, the 'relativity of suffering' and victimhood is discussed in more detail, as this discussion has more relevance with regards to Hannah's and Szmul's characters. In every other aspect, Paul Doll is not a victim, and it would be a mistake to view his troubled conscience and resulting mental health issues and alcoholism as a redeeming quality.

Finally, another interesting aspect of his characterisation is the way Paul Doll speaks and how Amis uses language to define key parts of his character. It is packed with German fillers and words, and is sometimes unnecessarily coarse. Through this use of language he contrasts even more strongly with the eloquent, sophisticated language of Thomsen or the elevated, spare language that Szmul uses. Like all German words in this novel, there are no umlauts in Doll's German, which is curious as it significantly changes the pronunciation of these words and it does not appear to have a function at all. The most striking thing about Doll's language is the bluntness and harshness of his words - he uses German words almost exclusively to graphically describe women's body parts - the German words, foreign enough to make readers pause, but not unfamiliar enough to be unintelligible, allow Amis to describe the women more graphically without being as explicitly vulgar as it would be in English - so much so that it appears to surprise even Doll himself, when he appraises his secretary Minna: "She is a personable and knowing young female, albeit far too flachbrustig (though her *Arsch* is perfectly all right, and if you hoiked up that tight skirt you'd... Don't quite see why I write like that. It isn't my style at all)" (Amis 2014, p. 62). Even more German is used to describe Alisz Seisser, who "is short in the *Unterschenkel*," but "has a glorious *Hinterteil*" (p. 127) and "prettiful *Titten*" (p. 132), or Hannah, when she is wearing a nightdress Doll 'picked up' in Kalifornia: "From *Kehle* to *Oberschenkel* her body seemed to be coated in icing sugar, and I could clearly see the outlines of her *Bruste*, the concavity of her *Bauchnabel* and the triangle of her *Geschlechtsorgane*..." (p.179). Although Doll remarks that describing women in such a fashion "isn't his style at all," he does it frequently, and after a while, the German words do not stand out as much in the text as the reader gets used to them. However, Amis uses this

way of describing bodies and body parts for Doll only – Thomsen and Szmul either do not engage in such descriptions or describe them in English. This unique stylistic measure has various effects. Firstly, it shows how Doll sees women's bodies – similar to the way he sees prisoners: as things, objects to use, abuse and dispose of as he pleased. Secondly, it can serve to estrange the reader with the foreign language, thereby making sure they do not relate to Doll. Lastly, it could just be that, as Sexton (2014) writes, that “Amis has spiffing fun with Doll, whom he has made into one of his low-life comedy butts, another Keith Talent or Lionel Asbo, blind to his own awfulness.” The German vocabulary, then, is an essential part of Doll's characterisation, whereas in the other characters' narratives, it is more of an anomaly that serves to emphasise certain words that may not have an equivalent in English.

Something else that does stand out, however, is the very coarse language Doll uses to describe himself to Szmul, when he is taunting him over the ‘murder in his mouth’:

‘Don't kill me, kill someone else,’ it increasingly amuses Doll to say. ‘I'm not a monster. I don't torture people for the hell of it. Slay a monster, Sonderkommandofuhrer. Kill Palitzsch. Kill Brodniewitsch. Slay a monster.’

Sometime he says (and I find, even in all this, that his diction still succeeds in offending me), ‘Kill someone powerful. I'm nothing. I'm not powerful. Me – powerful? No. I'm a cog in a vast machine. I'm rubbish. I'm just a cunt. I'm shit.’

[...] ‘But don't kill Paul Doll – though of course you're welcome to try. Doll's nothing. He's shit. He's just a cunt.’ (Amis 2014, p.136)

Although there is more coarse language in the novel⁷, here the vulgarity of the language draws specific attention and distracts from the narrative because it is so frequently used in this passage. Moreover, the most vulgar language is used by Doll to describe himself, and is described from Szmul's narrative, which is, in all other chapters, elegant, spare and haunting. This self-deprecating, coarse language that Doll uses in this scene further illustrates his compromised mental health and low self-esteem, but it could also be deliberately mocking towards Szmul, or both. His use of the phrase “a cog in a vast machine” is, for to the knowing eye, instantly recognisable as the phrase used by the defence of Adolf Eichmann at his trial in Jerusalem. Like Eichmann, Paul Doll uses the phrase to minimise his role in the camp – even though as its commandant, he obviously holds a great deal of power – especially over prisoners like Szmul. By using this particular phrasing, he puts himself on the same level as

⁷ the words ‘fuck’ or ‘fucking’ occur 25 times

Szmul, who is rightfully offended at the idea of it, as someone who has no choice, who is following orders and has no form of independence left.

Angelus 'Golo' Thomsen, according to Hofmann (2014) the "hero-cum-antihero" of the novel, remains ambiguous throughout the novel – his motivations never become clear, and it remains uncertain whose side he was on. Thomsen acts in very different ways and says very different, sometimes contrasting, things to various people, depending on their position in the camp and in the Nazi ranks, and how he feels about them. His narrative is the one the reader is acquainted with first: from his first observation of Hannah, to his philandering ways with other SS-women and his privileged position in Nazi society. He arrives at the camp to work as a liaison between the camp management and IG Farben, but his exact function is never specified. He attends meetings and appears to give a more political perspective to the construction and organisation of the new sub-camp. His narrative also involves more leisurely activities, including attending parties and gatherings organised by the SS, as well as 'entertaining' various wives of notable SS officers. At first, Thomsen enables and appears to support the extermination process and argues against any lenient methods towards the prisoners, such as the relocation to a sub-camp near the Buna factory or an increase in rations to make them more effective. He even reports one of the IG Farben officials, Burckl, to the Gestapo for being 'sympathetic' towards the Jewish prisoners. Burckl is then replaced. At the same time, however, Thomsen views himself as an '*obstruktive Mitlaufer*', discusses the imminent defeat of the Nazi forces, and even encourages and aids Captain Bullard with sabotaging machinery at the Buna factory. At the end of the novel, he is arrested and imprisoned for, presumably, the rest of the war. He loses a significant portion of his wealth, but is able to obtain a job as a translator for the Americans. He is characterised by his ambiguity and opportunism, but he does appear to have a troubled conscience. Important parts of his characterisation include: his interactions with Captain Bullard, his sabotage, arrest and his motivations to obstruct the Buna factory; his ambiguity and unpredictability throughout the novel, the liminal aspects of this ambiguity, and his troubled conscience at the end of the book.

Thomsen's first interaction with Captain Bullard, taking place around September or October 1942, appears to be somewhat mocking, when he misquotes a British patriotic song: "*Rule Britannica*,' I cried. '*Britain shall never never...*'" He is then corrected by Bullard, who

cynically adds: "*Rule Britannia. Britons never never shall be slaves. And look at me now*" (Amis 2014, p. 90, [sic, emphasis in original]). Thomsen and Bullard then make conversation about his capture in Libya at the North–African front. After formally introducing themselves, Thomsen agrees to bring Bullard cigarettes upon his next visit. Thomsen's behaviour appears to go unnoticed by any of the camp's guards, and he is able to speak with a prisoner alone; that, and the fact that Thomsen mentions that he had noticed Bullard "many times before", shows that Thomsen was a frequent visitor to the prisoner-of-war camp, and to the Buna factory. All conversations between the two take place in English rather than in German like the rest of the book, and even though the entire book is written in English, it is clear that the characters actually speak German. This is made clear by the use of italics in the typescript whenever a different language is used, but also by the fact that Thomsen clearly does not speak English very well and asks Bullard about his language skills ("*I hope my English is not too worse? 'It'll do.*" (p.90)). This first conversation between Bullard and Thomsen is an acknowledgement of the problems that arise when writing scenes that take place outside of the language the book is written in – Doll's fillers and Thomsen's honorifics also emphasise this fact, but do not address it in detail, whereas Thomsen's broken English puts a great emphasis on the language that is used in the rest of the book. Ironically, Thomsen later wonders "if the story of National Socialism could have unfolded in any other language," (p. 276), even though that is just what happens in this novel.

The next meeting between Bullard and Thomsen is a few weeks later, on 30 November 1942, and takes place under very different circumstances– after the Allied recapture of Benghazi, with the Axis Armies facing defeat in both North Africa and in Stalingrad, where they are surrounded by Soviet forces, the tide of the war appears to have turned; moreover, Thomsen has reported Frithuric Burckl for being too sympathetic with the Jewish prisoners at Buna. Thomsen states that "it could no longer be deferred," before he meets Bullard again (Amis 2014, p. 156). This time, he confronts Bullard with the sabotage of parts of Buna machinery and to offer his help with the 'resistance'. He says that "*for reasons that do not bother us, I am fed up completely of the Third Realm*" (p. 157). It is not specified at any point how exactly Thomsen is able to help the sabotage and the resistance. He is arrested at the end of the novel because, Doll tells Hannah "he's a proven traitor [...] He's been wrecking some very crucial machines at the Buna-Werke" (p. 268). Because of Doll's complex and manipulative relationship with Hannah, however, it is unsure how much of these allegations are actually true – they are further weakened by the fact that Thomsen left shortly after meeting with

Bullard on November 30 1942 to go to Berlin, and did not return until shortly before Walpurgisnacht, on April 30, 1943 (p. 157; 259). As such, it is likely that while Thomsen agreed to help, he was gone too long to actually do so – something Thomsen does appear anxious about: “All through the rain and wind of March I grew increasingly desperate to return to the Kat Zet. [...] it had to do with the tempo of the Buna-Werke and the tempo of the war” (p.243). However, Thomsen’s motivations for many of his actions, including the cooperation with the resistance, remain incredibly vague throughout the novel. In the very first chapter, Thomsen reveals that “All [he] needed was word from Uncle Martin, a specific order from Uncle Martin in the capital – and [he] would act” (p. 8), but what exactly he would do remains unclear and it is not mentioned again. He does not, even internally, explain his motivations to offer his help to Captain Bullard – or to report Frithuric Burckl either.

The fact that Thomsen’s true motives remain unclear, and that he has seemingly conflicting views and opinions depending on the company he is in – although they are always vague – shows that Thomsen is simply opportunistic and looks for the best possible outcome for himself in order to make sure that he comes out of the war on the winning side – whichever side that may be. In the last chapter titled ‘Aftermath’, Thomsen visits his aunt, who, after the German surrender, has been imprisoned in a former concentration camp by the American liberators. The fate of Gerda and her children – imprisoned as Nazis, denied medical care – offers a glimpse of what Thomsen’s fate would likely have been, too, had he not been arrested by the SS first. Thomsen’s opportunism makes him a highly ambiguous character, who will say whatever those listening want to hear, without being loyal to either side of the war – hovering somewhere in the middle, swinging to whichever side suits him best at the time, like a pendulum, in a way. At the beginning of the novel, it is August 1942, at the start of or slightly before the German offensive at Stalingrad began, and at a time when the odds were not yet against the German armies – even though according to Haffner, Hitler had already realised in 1941 that victory was no longer possible (Haffner 1979, p. 117). After the German surrender in North Africa and in Russia in 1943, Thomsen realises that the tide is turning and takes action to make sure he is on the side of the victory, and although not everything appears to go as he had thought, he is the only narrator to emerge from the war alive.

However, what makes him a distinctly liminal character is not only his opportunism and resulting ambiguity, but also the fact that, when he is fully ‘denazified’ by the Americans, his conscience is obviously conflicted. This becomes clear when he talks about his arrest with his aunt Gerda – who insists that the Bormanns never doubted his innocence:

‘We never doubted your innocence, Neffe! We knew you were completely innocent.’

‘Thank you, Tante.’

‘I’m *certain* your conscience is completely clear.’

In fact I did feel the need to talk about my conscience with a woman, but not with Gerda Bormann... The thing is, Tantchen, that in my zeal to retard the German power I inflicted further suffering on men who were already suffering, suffering beyond imagination. And dying, my love. In the period 1941-44, thirty-five thousand died at the Buna-Werke. I said

‘Of course I was innocent. It was the testimony of just one man.’

(Amis 2014, p. 279)

In this passage, several things stand out: although he does not say it out loud, Thomsen nonetheless reveals to the reader that he was trying to ‘retard German power’, even though he was arrested before he had the chance to do anything concrete, and that his ‘actions’ caused suffering to the British prisoners-of-war at Buna, and that he is very troubled by this fact. He emphasises later that, “in the Kat Zet, like every perpetrator, I felt doubled (this is me but also not me); after the war, I felt halved” (p. 285). This shows that he still considers himself, without a doubt, a perpetrator, but that he also considers himself a minor obstructor (p. 285). Because he was also, for a time, a prisoner (“Camps at first, then prison, thank God”), he is, by definition, a liminal character – as both a perpetrator and prisoner, he finds himself outside either category.

It is with the arrival of Mrs. Hannah Doll that the plot of the novel is set in motion – she arrives at the camp with her two daughters and catches the attention of Angelus Thomsen, who then sets out to seduce her. By the end of the first chapter, it is clear that Hannah and Paul Doll’s marriage is not a happy one – after Doll returns from the ramp, he does not feel well, but his wife offers no comfort: “Not a word of solicitude from Hannah, of course. Whilst she could clearly see that I was shaken to the core, she simply turned away with a little lift of the chin – as if, for all the world, *her* hardships were greater than my own” (Amis 2014, p. 20). Hannah and Paul Doll married at Christmas 1928, but met some time before that, when she was still in love with Dieter Kruger, a known radical Communist, with whom she rented “adjacent rooms at an especially disreputable boarding house” and whom she kept seeing, even when she was being courted by Paul Doll (p. 117; p.180). After Kruger was severely beat up, he was moved to Berlin, and left Hannah behind. From Doll’s recollection of the marriage,

it becomes clear that it was a loveless, distant marriage from the very start, and that Hannah was 6 weeks pregnant only a week after the wedding. It raises the suspicion that it is possible that the twins are not Doll's children – they were born only six months after their wedding, in the summer of 1929. This implication gives Hannah a distinct motive for marrying Paul Doll even though it is clear that she despises him: self-preservation, and to protect her children from possible harm.

Because Hannah is not a narrator, her motivations can only be guessed at. However, it seems clear that the partner of a known communist would have trouble as a single mother in Nazi-Germany, and could even end up in a concentration camp, much like Alisz Seisser's fate after her husband's death. Alisz has Sinti heritage, and was protected by her husband's military status until his death, but was sent to the Kat Zet not long after she left it. A marriage to someone who could protect her and her unborn child(ren) from harm thus makes sense, even if Hannah came to despise the man in question. This is also supported by the way Hannah refused any further 'spousal relations', turning them into virtual strangers, but never left him, even though she clearly does not support National Socialism fully. Hannah's loyalty, it becomes clear, lies not with her husband or her country, but with herself, her children, and Dieter Kruger. Her character can be considered 'grey' because she was obviously aware of some of the things that happened in the camp her husband worked at, and benefited from the Nazi regime in various ways – life in a luxurious villa, presents, stolen from 'Kalifornia' (p. 179), and protection from possible prison or camps she might have ended up in – yet she defied that regime (and her husband) where she could, and suffered, too, hearing about the various things that were supposedly done to her former lover, and, at the end of the novel, watching a man, who was supposed to kill her, die in front of her.

When Thomsen and Hannah meet again in 1948, she is not happy to see him and explains that it's not just him: "I've been living in dread of seeing anyone at all from back then," she admits (p. 293). When asked about whether she had feelings for Thomsen, she says she did,

'but something's happened. Back then, you were my figure for what was sane. For what was decent and normal and civilised. And now all that's been turned on its head. [...] You aren't normal any longer, not to me. When I see you, I'm there again. When I see you I smell it. And I don't want to smell it. [...] I was married to one of the most prolific murderers in history [...] a head full of someone else's ideas. I'm no good at it. I'm just not up to it. The thought of being with a man is alien to me now. I haven't given them a glance in years. I'm finished.' (Amis 2014, p. 298)

Rather than accepting the rejection of his advances based on her previous traumatic experiences, Thomsen tells her she does not have the right to feel that way – to not want anything to do with any men – because that would be akin to admitting that there is no way to come back from the life in the camps, and Hannah does not have the right to feel that way, since “only a victim has the right to say there’s no coming back from it. And they hardly ever do. They’re desperate to restart their lives. The ones that are truly broken are the ones we never hear from. They’re not talking to anybody. You, you were always your husband’s victim, but you were never a *victim*” (p. 299). Appearing mildly offended, Hannah repeats that suffering isn’t relative, or is it? Thomsen, knowing all about the suffering through his new job with the reparations office, disagrees, asking if she suffered to the same extent as the *victims* – italics are here in order, because, as per Thomsen’s observation, Hannah was *a* victim, of her husband’s abuse, but not a *victim*, like those he deals with in his work. Hannah’s final response, however, appears to surprise Thomsen, because she does *not* see herself as a victim: “The thing is we don’t deserve to come back from it. After that” (p. 299). She feels that because of what *they* have done, the regime she was a part of, that they deserve to feel bad, and do not deserve to ‘restart their lives’, as Thomsen has done, and as he implies that she should. They do not, according to her, deserve a ‘happily ever after’ – because that would mean that someone benefitted from ‘that. It is also for that reason, Hannah says, that she rejects him. “It’s simpler than [just giving up]. You and me. Listen. Imagine how disgusting it would be if anything good came out of that place” (p. 300). Throughout the passage, Hannah explicitly positions herself within the category of perpetrators, even if she was not directly responsible or involved, and accepts and embraces the guilt and disgust that comes with it. As such, while she is a complex and nuanced character who may not be categorised as either a victim or a perpetrator – thus placing her in a ‘grey zone’, she – and, as such, Amis – makes a point by having her place the blame on herself, and everyone who was involved with the regime.

The character of Szmul does the exact opposite. Amis’ entire characterisation of Szmul Zachariasz, the oldest member of the Sonderkommando and “the very saddest” man in the Lager (p. 33), is influenced by and perhaps even based on Levi’s essay ‘The Grey Zone’, as discussed in the previous chapter. As such, Szmul should, by default, be a liminal character,

because the Sonderkommando was Levi's example of 'the borderline of collaboration'⁸. Yet Amis makes a convincing case against Szmul being a liminal character, by having Szmul emphasise that he disagrees with the statement made by his "philosophical friend Adam" (quoting a passage directly from Levi (1989, p. 37)) that the Sonderkommando "don't even have the comfort of innocence" (Amis 2014, p. 34). Szmul "would still plead not guilty" (p. 34). Furthermore, Szmul's actions in the novel are almost solely dedicated not to his own survival, but seem an attempt to remain a good person, or even just 'a person'. Throughout the six chapters of the novel, Szmul is only seen 'working' a few times – when he tells Doll how to count the exhumed bodies before they are burned in pits (p. ...) and in the penultimate chapter, when he risks his life by saving half a family from certain death in the gas chamber by convincing them to give their child to its grandmother (p.) Contrary to what Preston (2014) wrote, Szmul's narrative is not about him having "a desperate drive to survive," because Szmul already knows that he will not leave the camp alive. He does try, however, to do good wherever he can. In his final moments, Szmul shows not a desperate attempt at survival, but an attempt to own his life, and his death by taking stand against the commandant one last time by refusing to kill Hannah and instead turning the gun on himself, to "prove that my life is mine, and mine alone" (p. 270). That resistance is there, too, when he helps the family on the ramp escape the gas chambers – "It is really too late to intervene; and if there is the slightest commotion I will die tonight and Shulamith [his wife] will die on May Day. And yet, eerily impelled, I approach, touch the man's shoulder" (p.240). Similarly, writing his testimony is an act of resistance, too – providing an account of his experiences in the Sonderkommando and burying them so that another may find them. Yet that does not make him a hero in his own eyes, because "a hero, of course, would *escape* and *tell the world*," even though "it is [his] feeling that the world has known for quite some time" (p. 34). Later, when Doll calls him *geheimnisträger*, Szmul cynically thinks: "Geheimnisträger: bearer of secrets. Secrets? What secrets? The whole county stops the nose at them" (p.82). By writing his testimony, he once again attempts to show that he owns his life, and with his account "not all of [him] will die" (p.270).

In this chapter, the concept of liminality, as developed by van Gennep (1908) and Turner (1969) were introduced and united with Primo Levi's similar concept of the grey zone,

⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, Rosenthal's translation of 'caso-limite di collaborazione' as "an extreme case of collaboration" (Levi 1989, p. 34), does not accurately cover Levi's intended meaning – following Greif (2005), the alternative translation of "the borderline of collaboration" is used here.

which he introduced in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989). These concepts share a multitude of characteristics and few differences; as such, they are here used as synonyms. Using these concepts, the four main characters of the novel were analysed and discussed in detail, starting with the character who is on the darkest side of the grey zone: camp commandant Paul Doll, the antagonist and villain of the story, who displays a number of interesting characteristics that show that, although he is considered stereotypical, he is also a more complex and nuanced character with a troubled conscience and a dangerously unstable mind; subsequently, Angelus Thomsen was discussed, the protagonist of the novel, but an inherently ambiguous character, who works against the Nazi regime while benefitting from his high-level connections in that same regime and who seems more opportunistic than actually resistant; thirdly, Mrs. Hannah Doll is discussed, a young woman trying to save herself and her unborn children from possible harm by marrying a man involved with her lover's captors, but who refuses to see herself as a victim and insists on living with the consequences; lastly, the character who is on the lightest side of the grey zone is analysed – Szmul refuses to see himself as a perpetrator, and although his character is the prime example of Levi's grey zone, this definition is rejected in the very first chapter. Instead, Szmul is shown to do 'good' wherever he can, and to stand up against his persecutors when he is able. He performs several acts of resistance and, until his final moments, attempts to prove that he owns his own life, and his death. His testimony, buried in the ground, is the final act of resistance. The discussion of testimony in the novel is at once nuanced and deeply troubling and reveals several important elements – from direct links to the scrolls of Auschwitz to fundamental questions about the nature of memory and testimony – which are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 –The Role of Testimony in Literature, History and *the Zone of Interest*

Testimony is a key element in *The Zone of Interest*, with Szmul's struggles with writing his own testimony and the discovery of writings buried by a now-dead member of the Sonderkommando. Oates (2014) writes that "each [narrator] bears witness to the unspeakable in his own way." Amis' narrative is influenced and inspired by a large number of books, about the Holocaust, academic research, contemporary testimonies and survivor testimonies and narratives. However, over seventy years after the war, new survivor testimony is becoming hard to find. The recent deaths of Elie Wiesel, probably the most famous survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald; Jules Schelvis, one of the few survivors of extermination camp Sobibor and an expert on the subject; Samuel Willenberg, the last remaining survivor of Treblinka; and Imre Kertész, Hungarian survivor and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, show that a time without living survivors is not far away. Soon, most of the literature published will be fictional narratives, written by authors who themselves had no part in the Holocaust, have no living memory of it, and, indeed, were not even born at the time. They, like most present-day readers, have to rely on the information that was made accessible to them by those who survived and gave their testimony in writing or on video. This chapter aims to shed light on several complicated issues regarding the Sonderkommando, their testimony, and holocaust survivor testimony in general. First, narrator and Sonderkommandoführer Szmul is discussed in detail, as well as his own struggles with writing, memory and testimony. Subsequently, the changing role of survivor testimony in history and literature is considered, and some of the issues relating to that are discussed. Lastly, the Scrolls of Auschwitz, testimonies by the Sonderkommando which were buried at Auschwitz, are discussed in some detail and the way Amis uses a particular passage of the Scrolls in his novel is analysed. Overall, the chapter attempts to show how the use and perception of testimony has changed in both history and literature, what the major issues are, and how Martin Amis addresses these issues in his novel.

Szmul's narrative is a small, but infinitely interesting part of the novel; as discussed earlier, his story is about testimony, memory, and self-determination. Even though he knows he will not survive the Sonderkommando, he attempts to control his own faith by defying Doll's orders to kill Hannah. He does this knowing that his wife Shulamith escaped to Budapest and is thus out of reach for the Nazis for the time being. In the discussion of Szmul's

character in the previous chapter, his testimony and the issues he raises when writing it remained largely undiscussed; only the ways in which his memories, experiences and testimony showed him to be a particularly liminal character were addressed and the focus was on his larger role in the narrative rather than a discussion of his experiences. Here, Szmul's views on testimony, memory and writing are explored in detail, focusing in particular on the scene in chapter 2 where Szmul reads a former Sonder's buried testimony and reflects on that.

In his first chapter, Szmul states that, even though the men of the Sonderkommando are "the saddest men in the Lager," he knows of three reasons why the Sonderkommando goes on living: "first, to bear witness, and, second, to exact mortal vengeance [...] Third, and most crucially, we save a life (or prolong a life) at the rate of one per transport" (Amis 2014, p. 33, 34). As a long-serving member of the Sonderkommando, Szmul has little hope of survival left, and he is extremely aware of this fact – everything he does only prolongs his life a little longer until he, like so many before him, will die at the hands of the Nazis. Although he says that saving a life, the one life per transport that the Sonderkommando might manage to save, is the most important reason to keep on living, there is only one scene in the novel in which Szmul manages to save someone from selection: a few days before Walpurgisnacht, he approaches a family of two parents, a child and a grandmother, and convinces the parents to let themselves be separated from the child and grandmother – as such, they are selected for work, whereas the other two go to the gas. In doing so, he knowingly risks his own life and – he believes – that of his wife, but nonetheless goes through with it.

What appears to be most important for Szmul is preserving his testimony and bearing witness to the horrors that he has seen. Although he is concerned that his testimony will not be believed, he also worries about not writing a truthful testimony in the first place. This is exemplified when Szmul and other Sonderkommando members decide to exhume the testimony of one of their former colleagues, to learn what he has written, because: "we, the Sonders, or some of us, will bear witness. And this question, unlike any other question, appears to be free of deep ambiguity. Or so we thought" (p. 77). The exhumed testimony, written in Yiddish by a Czech Jew called Josef, appears to have been embellished: the men, enraged by the perceived inaccuracy, cannot finish reading. After only a few lines, they cannot bear any more:

'Stop'

Many of the men had tears in their eyes – but they weren't tears of grief or guilt.

'Stop. She "made a short but fiery speech". Like hell she did. Stop.'

'Stop. He lies.'

'Silence would be better than this. Stop.'

'Stop. And don't put it back in the earth. Destroy it – unread. Stop.' (p. 78-79).

The testimony leaves the other men enraged, but Szmul, who is attempting to write his own testimony, is deeply troubled by it – the one thing he hoped would be unambiguous, has ended up being one of the most ambiguous and troubling questions of them all, namely whether testimony is reliable, truthful, and *true* – whatever these concepts may mean. As Richardson (2009) writes, truthfulness and truth can mean different things. She uses Charlotte Delbo's famous opening phrase, "Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful" (Delbo 1995, p. 1), to illustrate how 'truth' and 'truthfulness' can be distinguished: "'True' can be taken to represent the facts of an event as they are recorded by history [...] To say that her narrative is truthful is to say that it faithfully represents her memory of her experience, which may or may not replicate the historical record" (Richardson 2009, p. 55). Dori Laub, too (in Felman & Laub 1992), considers historical truth to be different from the truth in testimony, but he goes even further – he recalls an interview he conducted with a survivor of Auschwitz, who described the explosion of four chimneys at the Sonderkommando uprising in 1944. Because "historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four," historians dismissed her testimony as 'inaccurate', since "it was utterly important to remain accurate, least the revisionists in history discredit everything" (Felman & Laub 1992, p. 59-60). Laub, a psychoanalyst by trade, did not agree. He argued that the woman was not testifying to the number of chimneys exploding, but to something more crucial, namely:

The reality of an unimaginable occurrence [because] one chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number meant less than the fact of the occurrence. The event itself was almost inconceivable [because] the woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed resistance just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth. (Felman & Laub 1992, p. 60)

To Laub, historical inaccuracies such as this one do not matter: in his view, the correct memory of those details was not crucial to her testimony, and to focus on that would distract from the historical truth to which she was testifying: the existence of Jewish armed resistance (p. 60). With this approach, Josef's testimony is not so much a testimony to the exact scene that he

describes in his account, as to the existence of the gas chambers and the countless people who died there.

However, it appears as though Martin Amis does not share this approach, seemingly choosing a slightly more subtle, or conflicted view of the matter. This is exemplified by the questions Szmul raises when he decides to continue reading Josef's testimony by himself and subsequently worries about his own:

Josef, the chemist from Brno, was known to me here at the Lager, and I considered him a serious man... I am a serious man, and I am writing my testimony. Am I writing like this? Will I be able to control my pen, or will it just come out – *like this*? Josef's intentions, I'm sure, were of the best, even the highest; but what he writes is untrue. And unclear[...]

Will I lie? Will I need to deceive? I understand that I am disgusting. But will I write disgustingly? Anyway, I nonetheless make sure that Josef's pages are duly reinterred. (p. 79-80)

The questions show that Szmul, the moral compass of the book and the voice closest to Amis' own (source), is deeply conflicted by the testimony. By having Szmul wonder whether he will write disgustingly, Amis implies that the account by Josef is an example of disgusting writing, filled with lies and deception. However, at the same time, Szmul makes sure that Josef's pages are buried again, signifying that the existence of the testimony in itself is more important than the truth of its content. In doing so, Szmul makes sure that Josef's memory of the events stays alive, even if it may not reflect the actual events that have taken place in the gas chambers.

At the same time, Szmul questions the adequacy of language and writing to convey their experiences, because if there is the "need to deceive" in a testimony written with "the best, even the highest" intentions, then it is not enough to use only words written on scraps of paper. After reading the account, Szmul questions not only Josef's testimony and writing, untrue regardless of the 'highest' intentions with which this testimony was written, but his own memory, too. He wonders how he can trust his own pen if a man as serious as he is, and an educated man, too, was unable to do the same. Szmul's struggles with the adequacy of a written testimony, and of language, are illustrated by the scene where he reflects on the fate of the Jews, who "can only prolong their lives by helping the enemy to victory" (Amis 2014, p. 238). He is attempting to write his testimony, and he struggles tremendously with the medium he has available to him:

I am choking, I am drowning. This pencil and these scraps of paper aren't enough. I need colours, sounds – oils and orchestras. I need something more than words. (p. 238).

Szumil, it seems, cannot represent his memories adequately on paper, using nothing but words. However, rather than commenting on the inexplicable and unrepresentable nature of the event, Szmul emphasises that it *can* be represented and explained, only not with just one medium – not with *just* language. The phrase “I need something more than words” thus shows that Szmul, and by extension, Amis too, seems to depart from Adorno’s idea that art had no meaning after the Holocaust and the idea, put into words by Elie Wiesel, that “the Holocaust in its enormity defies language and art,” instead focusing on the remainder of Wiesel’s statement: “yet both must be used to tell the tale” (qtd. in Zelizer 2001, p. 18). Art, as such, is not only possible, Szmul thinks, but necessary in order to adequately convey the experience and memory of the concentration camp, and of the Sonderkommando in particular.

In literature, an art form that primarily – though not solely – uses language to craft a portrait of the writer's imagination or experience, and within the genre of Holocaust literature in particular, testimony has an ambiguous role, since “the purely literary and the purely historical worlds were never really pure of each other, and were often all too tragically interdependent” (Young 1990, p. 4). Testimony, both contemporary testimony in the form of war-time diaries and remembrances by survivors years after the Holocaust, is one of the most poignant examples of the interdependence of historical and literary worlds, and remains ambiguous and controversial in both academic disciplines – although works of testimony are often important historical sources and offer unique perspectives on the suffering of a person or a group of people, the fallibility of human memory often drove historians to seek other primary sources upon which to found their argument. Similarly, literary scholars and critics are often hesitant to judge a testimony – even in fictionalised form – as a kind of literature. A memoir, Franklin (2011) argues, “balances unsteadily between fidelity to the events it portrays and the making of literature. [...] Poetic austerity comes at a cost to the literal truth” (p. 75), even though, Franklin stresses, that does not detract from the validity of the memoir as a Holocaust testimonial.

Yet numerous survivors have chosen to not only write memoirs about their experience decades after the war – Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and Filip Müller, for example – some have fictionalised their experience in stories, novels or other forms of imaginative writing: Jorge Semprún wrote *The Long Voyage* (1963, republished in 2005 as *The Cattle Truck*), a novelised account which describes the author’s journey to Buchenwald as a political prisoner. In his memoir *Literature or Life* (1997), he wrote that “only the artifice of a masterly narrative will prove capable of conveying some of the truth of such testimony. But there is nothing

exceptional about this: it's the same with all great historical experiences" (p. 13). Tadeusz Borowski wrote various short stories based on his experiences in Auschwitz. Called "a masterpiece of Polish - and of world - literature" by Jan Kott (in Borowski 1976, p. 11), his stories deal mostly with 'privileged' prisoners, such as the Kapos, but also Polish prisoners who could receive packages, medical orderlies, or members of the *Kanadakommando*, who worked with the discarded belongings of the dead. The distinction between truth and fiction, memory and fantasy, is decidedly unclear.

Elie Wiesel, on the other hand, famously said that a novel about Auschwitz is either not a novel, or not about Auschwitz. He was perhaps the most vocal critic of literary writing on the Holocaust, although he has written multiple books on the topic. His view is shared by philosopher Berel Lang, who argues that literary writing on the Holocaust appropriates authenticity from historical discourse and that "Holocaust writing characteristically 'aspires constantly to the condition of history'" (2000, p. 20). Although he does acknowledge that literary renderings of the Holocaust are possible - something that can no longer be denied - he writes that "wherever it appears, literary representation imposes artifice, a figurative mediation of language, and the contrivance of a persona [...] on the part of the writer" (1990, p. xi). Growing numbers of scholars, however, are not interested in distinguishing history and fiction, Levi & Rothberg write, and more in exploring the way the two interact and which problems they share (2003, p. 325).

Richardson (2009) writes that a rigid boundary between 'fact' and 'fiction', is far too proscriptive, and suggests a different approach: like Young (1990) does. Richardson, too, prefers "a sort of 'narrative continuum' between 'objective' historical analysis on the one hand, and completely fabricated narrative on the other" (2009, p. 54). This continuum does not aim to judge the quality or validity of any of these works, but merely the way in which the author frames their work. There are many different forms that testimony can take, and they all interact differently with their audience and with history, and thus inhabit a different place on Richardson's continuum. Although there is, or course, variation within them, these genres are distinctive in the way they are written, publicised and read. "Genre," Middleton and Woods (2000) write, "is too often treated as a formalism [...]. It is better thought of as a code of practice between text and their readers, listeners, publishers academics and reviewers, which advises them how they are expected to respond to the text" (p. 7). The distinctions between these various forms of testimony are largely based on the concept of 'truthfulness', and how 'truthful' to history the works in question are. Examples include: transcribed or paraphrased

interviews, such as the interviews in Greif's volume *We Wept Without Tears*, Venezia's book *Inside the Gas Chambers*, *The Holocaust Odyssey of Daniel Bannahmias*, written by [name] ...; memoirs and autobiographical accounts, such as Levi's *If This is a Man*, Lengyel's *Five Chimneys*, Nyiszli's *A Doctor's Eye-witness account*, Müller's *Eye-witness Auschwitz* and many more; and finally, fictionalised and novelised accounts, such as Semprún's *The Cattle Truck*, Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, or Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz and After*.

According to White (qtd. in Young, 1990), it has not been long that history and fiction have become each other's opposite, because "prior to the French Revolution, historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art" (p. 8). It was understood by the audience that "many kinds of truth, even in history, could only be understood by means of fictional techniques of representation" (in Young 1990, p. 8). This understanding seems to have changed, because there is "an almost obsessive tendency by writers of both historical and now documentary discourse to rid their narrative of all signs of style in order to distinguish between factual and fictional works" (Young 1990, p. 8). Because of this tendency, a reader will not quickly turn to a narrative such as Semprún's or Borowski's, which were published as a novel and a collection of short stories, respectively, for its faithfulness to the facts of history. Here, the literary merit is more pronounced and expected, whereas the 'truthfulness' or 'reliability' of the work matters less, and the boundary between real memory and imagination is decidedly unclear. However, a reader will likely not look for explicit literary merit, metaphors or beautiful language in a transcribed interview such as in Greif (2005), since that was explicitly written as an academic contribution to the historical record – readers and critics will engage with the text differently.

The value and role of testimony in history and historiography has changed significantly since the end of the war – more survivors have come forward with their experiences during the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and apart from the testimonial contributions at the trial itself, many memoirs and other forms of (literary) testimony have been published. In the years immediately after the war, survivors were often told to "forget and get on with rebuilding their lives" (Bloxham & Kushner 2005, p. 32). They also write that in the first four years after the war, about seventy-five memoirs were published and even fewer in the first half of the 1950s. A great deal of the accounts were written in Yiddish and Hebrew and thus largely inaccessible for everyone but a Jewish audience, and, Bloxham and Kushner argue, written as memorials to the loss (p. 29). Those memoirs that were published,

such as Miklos Nyiszli's *A Doctor's Eye-witness Account* (published in Polish in 1946) or Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* (published in Italian in 1947), had trouble finding publishers and audiences. Levi's work only sold a few thousand copies until it was reprinted by a different publisher in 1957 (Levi 1988, p. 137). The English translation was not published until 1959, and the translation of Nyiszli's work not until 1960. The public, Levi writes in a preface to the theatre edition of *If This is a Man*, "was not yet ready to understand and measure the phenomenon of the concentration camps" (Levi 2005, p.25). The nightmare that many survivors had whilst imprisoned, in which "they had returned home and with passion and relief described their past sufferings, addressing themselves to a loved person, and were not believed, indeed were not even listened to" (Levi 1988, p. 2), came, to a certain extent, true in the first years after the end of the war. Almost all of the countries and cities that survivors returned to, had also suffered greatly in the war and needed to be rebuilt before any attempt could be made at healing from the individual and collective traumas, and, thus, before testimonies could be listened to and believed. Levi recalls a common nightmare of many concentration camp prisoners that they survived the camp and returned home, only to find that when they told about their ordeals, no one believed them, or indeed, even listened. This belief, that what the prisoners had experienced was beyond belief for those who had not experienced it, also plays a role in *The Zone of Interest*:

The thought I find hardest to avoid is the thought of returning home to my wife. I can avoid the thought, but I can't avoid the dream. In the dream I enter the kitchen and she swivels in her chair and says, 'You're back. What happened?' And when I begin my story she listens for a while and then turns away, shaking her head. And that is all.. It's not as if I tell her about my first thirty days in the Lager. It's not as if I tell her about the time of the silent boys. (Amis 2014, p. 137)

Yet it was not only 'ordinary people' who were incapable or unwilling to hear the survivors' stories and be confronted with the wartime atrocities. Post-war trials often marginalised and ignored eye-witness evidence, which, according to Bloxham and Kushner (2005), "reflected legal traditions, [...] as well as the lack of status and respect given to the victims of Nazism" (p. 32). Until the start of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, 1961, very few survivors were called to the witness stand. At Eichmann's trial, 128 survivors of various concentration camps gave their testimonies in front of the court, although not all had evidence relevant to the accused (Yad Vashem, *Eichmann/Witnesses*, 128 photographs). This trial, Landsman (2011) argues, has served as a model for subsequent atrocity trials, even though the witness-driven atrocity trial can be flawed and prejudiced (p. 100). At the second

Auschwitz trial, held in Frankfurt from 1963-65, over 300 witnesses were heard, of whom 210 were survivors.

Early historians, who collected most of their research material at the earlier trials, may have also approached Holocaust testimony with wrong expectations, and have been sceptical of the reliability of post-war testimony (Kushner 1994, p. 17). There was a certain level of intellectual snobbery involved, Kushner states: Gerald Reitlinger (1953) writes that survivors were “hardly educated men” (Reitlinger 1953, p. 581). The victims appear almost in an afterthought, “as an interesting but not essential element in [history]” (Kushner 1994, p. 4). Exactly that is what Raul Hilberg wrote in the preface to his 1961 masterpiece *The Destruction of the European Jews*:

This is not a book about the Jews. It is a book about the people who destroyed the Jews. Not much will be read here about the victims. The focus here is placed on the perpetrators. [...] There will be no emphasis on the effects of the German measures upon Jewry in Europe and elsewhere. We shall not dwell on Jewish suffering, nor shall we explore the social characteristics of ghetto life or camp existence. Insofar as we may examine Jewish institutions, we will do so primarily through the eyes of the Germans: as tools which were used in the destruction process. (Hilberg 1961, p. v)

In many ways, the same can be said about Amis’ novel: like his other Holocaust novel *Time’s Arrow*, the protagonist is a German involved in the Nazi and concentration camp regime – Angelus Thomsen, as seen in the previous chapter, is not as far in the grey zone as Paul Doll or Odilo Unverdorben in *Time’s Arrow*, but he is still deeply involved in the camp management.

Martin Gilbert’s epic account *the Holocaust: the Jewish Tragedy* (1986), attempts “to draw on the nearest of the witnesses, those closest to the destruction, and through their testimony [he attempts] to tell something of the suffering of those who perished, and are forever silent” (Gilbert 1986, p. 18). Gilbert’s book is the first attempt to make a coherent overview of the war through victim testimony. The Sonderkommando, too, is included, in the writings from Zalman Lewental and his detailed account of the rebellion of the Sonderkommando on 7 October, 1944. Another member of the Sonderkommando, at Belzec extermination camp, recounts a scene where a hundred young boys were selected to help the Sonderkommando with carrying the enormous number of corpses. Without water or food, they worked in the snow and mud all day before they were shot (Reder, qtd. in Gilbert 1986, p. 501). This scene is referred to in *The Zone of Interest* – Sonderkommandoführer Szmul lost his two sons in what he calls ‘the time of the Silent Boys’ (Amis 2014). In the twenty-five years between the

publication of Hilberg's work and that of Gilbert, however, many more things had become known about the Holocaust, and as the time passed, public engagement with the subject matter increased, as well as the respect shown to Holocaust survivors.

As the value, perception and role of testimony changed, so did the role of the witness. Laub identifies three separate, distinct levels of witnessing in Felman & Laub (1992): "the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself" (p. 75). These three levels can co-exist in one person, or it may be that only one level of witnessing is present. However, Laub argues, they are all acts of witnessing, and it may be concluded that everyone who experiences one level of witnessing is a witness. However, to consider those who witness only indirectly, as is the case with hearing or reading a survivor's testimony, 'witnesses', too, and to use the same meaning for a survivor who has witnessed the Holocaust is also incorrect, since it is clearly not the same to read about a traumatic event as to have gone through it. Some, like Primo Levi, go even further than that, and argue that even those who have survived the concentration camps are not 'true' witnesses:

We – the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion, of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch the bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims', the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception [...]

We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate, but also that of the others, the submerged; but this was a discourse on 'behalf of the third parties', the story of things seen from close by, not experienced personally. [...] Even if they had paper and pen, the submerged would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy. (Levi 1989, p. 63-64)

Because those who have survived the concentration camps – the 'saved' – have not touched the bottom, have not fully experienced the horrors of the camps, they are not the true witnesses. Since those who did 'see the Gorgon', the 'drowned' can no longer speak, the survivors must do so, in their place. Laub, too, asserts that "the event produces no witnesses," because "not only did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims" (Felman & Laub 1992, p. 80).

However, the very existence of documents like the Scrolls of Auschwitz proves Laub's assertion wrong: there were witnesses, and there are testimonies written by those who have fully experienced all horrors of the camp. Chare & Williams (2016) argue that "the Sonderkommando writings challenge the idea of unrepresentability, both through their context of production and content" (p. 14). Furthermore, Laub argues that the Holocaust was impossible to witness from within because the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made it unthinkable "that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the [...] frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed" (p.81). This is, according to Chare & Williams (2016), one of the reasons why Laub dismisses the testimonies even though he acknowledges their existence⁹ (p.14). And indeed, Laub's main reason for dismissing the testimonies of the Sonderkommando was that "these attempts to inform oneself and to inform others were doomed to fail. The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially *not be met during the actual occurrence*" (p. 82): in other words – the writers were unable to grasp exactly what was going on because it was beyond the limits of human ability to understand. Laub argues earlier in his book that "the victim's narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma – does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence" (Felman & Laub 1992, p. 57). He continues:

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (p. 57)

Chare & Williams, on the other hand, argue that the writers of the 'Scrolls' *were* able to grasp what was going on around them, and were able to bear witness, because writing "became a space through which traumatic experiences could be articulated and, to a degree, managed. Sheets of paper 'listened'. The words committed to them provided a source of psychic sustenance to each author. They helped them prevent the kind of loss of subjectivity that Laub has claimed rendered attesting from within impossible" (2016, p. 15). The blank screen that

⁹ Felman & Laub 1992, p 84: "Diaries were written and buried in the ground so as to be historically preserved, pictures were taken in secret, messengers and escapes tried to inform and to warn the world of what was taking place."

Laub deems necessary for the bearing of witness, they argue, is provided by the blank pages upon which the authors wrote.

Josef's testimony, discussed earlier in this chapter, not only raises a number of questions about the reliability of survivor testimony, but there is also something more problematic going on in those scenes because the scenes that Szmul reads in that testimony are taken almost verbatim from the testimony of Sonderkommando member Leyb Langfus, which was found as part of the Scrolls of Auschwitz.

Langfus' testimony (in Mark 1982, p. 207-8)

In the gas bunker, totally naked, a young woman made an impassioned speech against the German murderers and the oppression, concluding with these words: "We will not die; our memory will be immortalized in the history of our people. Our initiative and our spirit live and bloom. The German people will pay an incalculable price for our blood. Down with the barbarism in the image of Nazi Germany! Long Live Poland!" She then turned to the Jewish Sonderkommandos and said: "Remember, your sacred purpose is to avenge our innocent blood! Tell the brothers of our people that we are going to our death with pride and profound consciousness." The Poles then knelt and, formally, in an impressive pose, whispered a prayer: still on their knees they sang the Polish national anthem in chorus. The Jews sang Hatikvah. Their common, cruel fate joined in that cursed place the lyric notes of the two anthems so different from one another. Movingly and heartily, they expressed their last emotions and their consolation in the hope of their peoples future.

Josef's testimony (Amis 2014, p. xx)

A certain young Polish woman made a very short but fiery speech in the gas chamber . . . She condemned the Nazi crimes and oppression and ended with the words, 'We shall not die now, the history of our nation will immortalise us, our initiative and spirit are alive and flourishing . . .' Then the Poles knelt on the ground and solemnly said a certain prayer, in a posture that made an immense impression, then they arose and all together in chorus sang the Polish anthem, the Jews sang the 'Hatikvah'. The cruel common fate in this accursed spot merged the lyric tones of these diverse anthems into one whole. They expressed in this way their last feelings with a deeply moving warmth and their hopes for, and belief in, the future of their...

The passages above show the obvious similarities between a part of Leyb Langfus' testimony and Josef's, and this has some problematic implications, considering the response that Amis' Sonderkommando members had to Josef's testimony: "'Stop. He lies.' 'Silence would be better than this. Stop.' 'Stop. And don't put it back in the earth. Destroy it - unread'" (Amis 2014, p. 79). Szmul's response is a little more nuanced, but he, too, feels that what Josef wrote is "untrue. And unclean" (p. 79). With this passage, and especially with the last sentence: "Anyway, I nonetheless make sure that Josef's pages are duly reinterred" (p. 80), Amis, as discussed earlier in this chapter, shows that even testimony which is not 'historically true' has value and deserves to be considered valid. In this, he follows Laub's argumentation, implying that the truth does not matter, because to focus on such details would distract from the

historical truth and the existence of the Sonderkommando. The fact that this passage is inspired by or copied from an existing Sonderkommando testimony shows the depth of Amis' research and his view on that testimony: it does not matter so much whether everything that was described happened as such – what matters is that the testimony exists because it shows that members of the Sonderkommando maintained enough of their humanity, enough of their sanity, to be able to write down how they experienced their work, and that they still had things they wanted to say. The Scrolls of Auschwitz not only challenge the idea of unrepresentability (Chare & Williams 2016), but they also give a human reading of the horror that the Sonderkommando went through.

Throughout this chapter, Szmul's narrative and views of testimony were central to the discussion; his short chapters asked some fundamental questions about the role, reliability and function of testimony, which have been discussed here. Some of the most important issues with testimony are exemplified by the passages from Josef's testimony that Szmul reads, which enrages the members of the Sonderkommando who read it, because it appears to have been embellished or made up entirely. Of the three reasons to keep on living that Szmul mentions, what appears to be most important is preserving his testimony and bearing witness to the horrors that he has seen. Josef's testimony leaves him with questions and doubts about both Josef's and his own, but he nevertheless makes sure Josef's testimony is reinterred and later buries his own, just before he goes to his death. Questions of truthfulness and reliability have played a large role in the changing perceptions of testimony in historical and literary contexts, with historians questioning how testimony can be useful in historiography if it is not completely consistent with the facts, and literary scholars questioning how a work of testimony can be viewed as literature if the content is "beyond criticism". Both disciplines have, over time, changed to incorporate the growing body of testimony, and the Sonderkommando and other 'privileged' prisoners, have slowly made their way into the academic canon¹⁰. Throughout this thesis, the representation of the Sonderkommando has been central to the discussion: the way in which historical contexts and intertextual references affect the way the Sonderkommando is viewed and portrayed in the novel, as well as the liminal position of Szmul and the other characters, and, in this chapter, the role of testimony and how the Sonderkommando is represented through their testimony and in the novel.

¹⁰ The Sonderkommando has been expertly analysed by Greif (2005), the Scrolls of Auschwitz, in particular, by Chare & Williams (2013, 2016), whereas Brown (2014) has written about 'privileged' prisoners.

Conclusion

The case study in this MA thesis was *The Zone of Interest*, Martin Amis' most recent novel in which he explores various aspects of the concentration camp. The work of the Sonderkommando, prisoners who were – among other things – forced to work in the gas chambers, is essential to capturing the atmosphere of the concentration camp in this novel. Narrator Szmul is a long-serving member of the Sonderkommando, and Amis' book is one of the first, if not *the* first fictional narratives to portray the Sonderkommando.

Throughout the preceding three chapters, the representation of the Sonderkommando has been the main focus of this thesis. Using the historical and intertextual context of the novel, the first chapter attempted to analyse and discuss how the (academic) interest in the Sonderkommando has changed over the past six or so decades that have passed since the war, as well as how the use of these contexts influence the portrayal and perception of the Sonderkommando. The second chapter focussed on the four main characters, where they were in the 'grey zone' and what exactly made their behaviour liminal, while the third analysed the role of testimony in history and literature, but also in *The Zone of Interest*. The main research question, to which a comprehensive answer will be formed in this final part of the thesis, was:

How is the Sonderkommando represented in *The Zone of Interest* and how does Martin Amis deal with this through intertextual and historical references, notions of liminality, and testimony?

The Sonderkommando has a large role in the novel, featuring at key points in the narrative to represent the horrors of the camp. Through Szmul's narrative, the book paints an image of the Sonderkommando as moral, pained, thoughtful people, and above all, *innocent*, suffering victims. This is in contrast with many views, including that of Primo Levi, whose work inspired Amis in writing this book. He saw the Sonderkommando as an "extreme case of collaboration", who were 'deprived of the solace of innocence' (Levi 1989, p. 37), who should not be judged by humans, who worked under duress, but who were not innocent, as such. Amis places the Sonderkommando, and Szmul in particular, in a lighter area of the Grey Zone, whereas Primo Levi does the opposite. Through intertextual references, Amis engages in a critical conversation with Primo Levi, Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman on various topics. He shows disagreement with both Levi and Arendt on key points of their arguments

in 'The Grey Zone' and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, respectively, and with that, presents a new and nuanced perspective on the Sonderkommando as prisoners. His historical references show an enormous awareness of the historical record of the war, as well as of the plight of the Sonderkommando, culminating in his extensive reference to the Scrolls of Auschwitz and the complex implications of that testimony. By having Szmul (and the other members of the Sonderkommando) read and discuss that testimony, Amis raises important questions about the nature of testimony, which influence the reading of any work profoundly. The concept of liminality returns for the most part in Amis' engagement with Primo Levi from the very start of the novel. The characters, too, are examples of liminality in the book, and, as was discussed in chapter two, Amis' characters can all be placed in the Grey Zone, with Doll at the very darkest edge and Szmul, portrayed as 'good' and as 'innocent as possible' on the other end.

As with any project, factors such as time, space and resources limited the research in several ways. The film *Son of Saul* turned out to be unavailable for repeated viewings and analysis, so the original plan of an interdisciplinary comparison between *The Zone of Interest* and *Son of Saul* had to be abandoned when this became clear. The limited scope of the thesis meant that the main focus had to be the novel, and that there was, as such, little space for exploring the historical background, or, for example, the use of fact and fiction in the novel. Regardless of these limitations, the aim of this thesis was to make a contribution to the body of research about the Sonderkommando and literature about the Sonderkommando. As one of the first novels about the Sonderkommando, *The Zone of Interest* provided an ideal case study and a window into various themes relating to the representation and portrayal of the Sonderkommando in literature which could, with some more research, be extrapolated to a wider frame of reference.

Further research into various topics relating to the literature and representation of the Sonderkommando is still needed. A particularly interesting case study would be *Son of Saul*, which deals with a member of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando who believes one of the bodies he finds is his son's, and, through the preparations for the uprising in 1944, attempts to find a rabbi to give his son a proper burial. The film, which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, raises important questions about the Sonderkommando, and is different from other films about the Holocaust, both in its message, the way it was filmed and its subject matter. Many different approaches could be taken in researching this film and its

representation of the Sonderkommando, from a Film Studies perspective to an interdisciplinary historical or literary approach.

Another interesting topic could be an investigation into Sonderkommando testimonies that were published in the decades after the war, analysing various things, such as how the style of testimonies changed over time and how that might affect the interpretation of the work. A difference can be made between testimonies written during the war, such as the *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, which have extensively been studied by Chare & Williams (2013, 2016), and testimonies written after the war for the purpose of publication. This area has not been studied much, and valuable contributions can thus be made by future research.

Lastly, it would be interesting to analyse the novel in reference to Martin Amis' other works, particularly *Time's Arrow*, but also other works, to find common themes, stylistic similarities and differences. Various reviewers emphasised that *The Zone of Interest* cannot be read separately from Amis' other work, and that this reading provides vastly different interpretations of the novel's themes. This thesis looked at the novel in the context of its subject matter and analysed it alongside historical and theoretical sources to come to a conclusion about the Sonderkommando, but there are more interesting things about the novel than its representation of the Sonderkommando, and the way it interacts or counteracts the rest of Amis' oeuvre is something that can be researched extensively, as well.

Thus, in *The Zone of Interest*, Amis portrays the Sonderkommando differently from other authors, as suffering, innocent victims, who should not just 'not be judged', but who are ultimately innocent and human. Through his extensive references to other authors and historical sources and events, Amis shows that his portrayal is based on facts; with his use and discussion of testimony, he shows an awareness of questions relating to the function and role of testimony and a willingness to engage with them; finally, the characters further emphasise that Szmul is ultimately a good person, and a victim, and that as such, the Sonderkommando, too, were victims who were not "an extreme case of collaboration," as Levi wrote, but who were forced labourers.

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