

The Tattooist of Auschwitz by Heather Morris

Summary

In 1942, a Slovakian Jew imprisoned in the Auschwitz concentration camp meets the love of his life. As a tattooist for the Nazi authorities, Lale Sokolov inks a number on prisoners as they enter the camp. His encounter with a young woman named Gita marks his heart, as he vows to somehow survive the camp and marry her. Delicately balanced between captors and fellow prisoners, Lale uses his privileged position to help others survive. Before war's end, Lale witnesses the wide spectrum of human behavior during war, both evil and altruism. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is "a testament to the endurance of love and humanity under the darkest possible conditions."

From the publisher

Author Biography

Heather Morris wrote the story of the concentration camp tattooist as a screenplay before turning it into a novel. In 2003, she met Lale Sokolov, who 'might just have a story worth telling'. Though Lale had been hesitant to reveal his story, he began to share it as a result of his friendship with Morris.

Heather Morris was born in New Zealand, but now lives in Australia. She had a career in social work at a hospital while simultaneously writing screenplays. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is her debut novel.

Adapted from the publisher and author's webpages

Discussion Questions

1. How did you feel about Lale when he was first introduced, as he arrived in Auschwitz? How did your understanding of him change throughout the novel?
2. What qualities did Lale have that influenced the way he was treated in the camp? Where did those qualities come from?
3. Survival in the camp depended on people doing deeds of questionable morality. Lale became the tattooist, but how did Gita's choices affect her survival? What about her friend who befriended a Nazi?
4. Inmates in the concentration camp had to make life-or-death decisions every day. Why did some make the "right" decisions and survive while others did not?
5. Discuss some of the small acts of humanity carried out by individuals in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. How did these small acts of kindness have greater implications? Did it make you reconsider what you believe to be brave or heroic? Did this make you think differently about the impact of your own everyday actions?
6. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* makes clear that there were also non-Jewish prisoners in the camp. How did the treatment of Jews differ from that of non-Jews? How did differences manifest themselves?
7. Had Gita and Lale met in a more conventional way, would they have developed the same kind of relationship? How did their circumstances change the course of their romance?

8. In what ways were the relationships between Gita and her friends different from the usual friendships between teenage girls? In what ways were they similar?

9. In what ways was Lale a hero? In what ways was he an ordinary man?

10. Lale faced danger even after the camp was liberated. How did his experiences immediately after liberation prepare him for the rest of his life?

11. How does *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* change your perceptions about the Holocaust in particular, and war in general? What implications does this book hold for our own time?

Questions from HarperCollins Reading Discussion Guides

Reviews

Publishers Weekly Reviews 2018 July #5

...To many, this book will be most appreciated for its powerful evocation of the everyday horrors of life as a prisoner in a concentration camp, while others will be heartened by the novel's message of how true love can transcend even the most hellishly inhuman environments. This is a perfect novel for book clubs and readers of historical fiction.

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Booklist Reviews 2018 August #1

Australian author Morris' first novel is based heavily on the memories of Lale Sokolov, a Slovakian Jew who spent almost three years in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. For most of that time, he tattooed numbers onto the arms of fellow prisoners, one of whom he would later marry. Like Lale, Gita was Slovakian, and with some maneuvering by him, she was assigned to a relatively safe job, working as a secretary in the administrative building. Morris tells their story in rapidly moving present tense, in which the horrors of the camps contrast with the growing love between them. Lale comes across as a sharp-witted businessman with a touch of the con artist, smuggling out jewels and currency in sausages and chocolate. Although one might suspect that there's far more to his past than is revealed here, much of Lale's story's complexity makes it onto the page. And even though it's clear that Lale will survive, Morris imbues the novel with remarkable suspense. Copyright 2018 Booklist Reviews.

Library Journal Reviews 2018 August #1

Originally intended as a screenplay, this compelling debut is based on the life of Lale Sokolov, a Slovakian Jew imprisoned for almost three years at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he served as the tattooist marking prisoners. Soon after the 25-year-old arrives at Birkenau, he contracts typhus and is left for dead. Rescued by fellow inmates and Pepan, an older French man and tattooist, Lale learns Pepan's trade, which, along with fluency in six languages, allows Lale privileges of a single room and extra food. His sole mission is to survive the unbelievable horrors, until he meets young Gita. Then he vows to marry her. Despite the bleakness and death surrounding them, Lale and Gita's passionate love blooms in their precious moments alone. Readers will root for the two despite the many obstacles they face. VERDICT Historical fiction and memoir fans will be gripped by this unforgettable Holocaust story...

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Background Article for further reading:

"The Perils of (Mostly) Fact-Based Holocaust Novels." *New York Times*, November 14, 2018, C6(L).