

***The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and the Trivialisation of the Holocaust: A Roundtable Discussion**

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Introduction

(Dr Jan Lániček, UNSW Sydney)

'This story, full of beauty and hope, is based on years of interviews author Heather Morris conducted with real-life Holocaust survivor and Auschwitz-Birkenau tattooist Ludwig (Lale) Sokolov. It is heart-wrenching, illuminating, and unforgettable.' (<http://www.heathermorrisauthor.com/the-tattooist-of-auschwitz/>)

'It's a sex story of Auschwitz that has very little historical accuracy'
(Professor Konrad Kwiet, quoted in Harari, 2018)

The *Tattooist of Auschwitz* is a debut novel by the New Zealand-born Heather Morris, who currently resides in Melbourne, Australia. It is a fictionalised account based on Morris' interviews with Lale Sokolov (Eisenberg), a Holocaust survivor who after the war emigrated to Australia. Lale and his future wife Gita Furman were deported from Slovakia to Auschwitz in 1942. They both survived. He had been given a position of some prominence over his fellow prisoners, tattooing numbers on the forearm of those who passed through the selection upon their arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau and were temporarily left alive, toiling for the German war industry. Lale and Gita fell in love in the camp and married after their post-war return to Bratislava.

Morris' personal website characterises her as a 'Number 1 New York Times bestselling author'. But the quotes that open this roundtable discussion show the divisive nature of responses that the book elicited in the public and in the academic community. The book received rave reviews all over the world, but the academic community of Holocaust scholars and Holocaust professionals were more alarmed by the story as it was retold by Morris. It is unusual that an author born in a small town in antipodean New Zealand stirs such international controversy about the ways the Holocaust should be represented in literature (and possibly soon in film) and what are the responsibilities, if any, of scholars and writers when bringing to the public stories from the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

The list of accolades for the book is long: Over 3 million copies sold worldwide, number 1 bestseller in Britain and Ireland, foreign rights sold to 53 territories, and Ireland's bestselling novel in 2018, among others (Publisher's flyer, distributed with copies of *Cilka's Journey*). Amazon.com, when giving the book the award for the Best Book of September 2018, characterized *the Tattooist* as follows: 'Based on the real-life experiences of Holocaust survivor Ludwig (Lale) Sokolov, author Heather Morris's novel is a testament to the human spirit and the power of love to bloom in even the darkest places'. The publisher even sold the rights to a film producer, with the plan to release 'a high-end drama series' in 2020.

The response from the academic community was less positive. The most severe criticism was voiced by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum. Wanda Witek-Malicka, from the Auschwitz Memorial Research Center, pointed in her extensive review to the numerous historical mistakes and inaccuracies that, in her opinion, problematise the claim of the publisher that ‘every reasonable attempt to verify the facts against available documentation has been made.’ In contrast, Witek-Malicka concludes that the ‘book contains numerous errors and information inconsistent with the facts, as well as exaggerations, misinterpretations and understatements on which the overall inauthentic picture of the camp reality is built’. But does it matter? Witek-Malicka thinks so, and asserts that ‘this book cannot be recommended as a valuable title for persons who want to explore and understand the history of KL Auschwitz’ (Witek-Malicka, 2018). Likewise, Bram Presser, an Australian author of another Holocaust-related book published in 2018, told Fiona Harari from *The Australian*: ‘If you write a Holocaust book you have an ethical responsibility to do proper research, proper fact-checking. Otherwise you are doing Holocaust memory disservice and potentially flaming Holocaust deniers.’ (Harari, 2018)



Figure 1 and 2 Example of divisive responses to Morris' book on twitter. Note the first tweet that characterizes the book as a 'true story' (Source: Twitter.com).

The *Tattooist* and its recent sequel, *Cilka's Journey*, have made a huge impact on the public perception of Auschwitz and its history. Both books are sold in large shopping malls, alongside candy and chocolate, or you can get discounted copies at the airport before you board your long-haul flight from Australia. But for some people, including parts of the academic community, there is something disturbing about such fictionalisation and trivialisation of the Holocaust. These tensions are not novel. Many times, in the past, survivors and Holocaust scholars raised their eyebrows over fictional accounts of the Holocaust, and the way in which they retell the story of the Shoah. They have opposed the romanticisation and trivialisation of the Holocaust, and kitschy depiction of survival during the horrors of the genocide. But some of the most trivial representations of the Holocaust made major impact on the policies of commemoration and helped to spread awareness of the Holocaust across the globe. The famous 1978 soap opera *Holocaust: The Story of Family Weiss* is the best example. This leads us to the intriguing questions of whether the benefit of such fictionalised or trivialised accounts does not in fact outweigh the major factual mistakes and problematic representation of the wartime events. But also, who decides, what is correct and incorrect representation of the Holocaust?

This was the main reason why the editorial board of the *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* decided to approach three international scholars, with a request to discuss Morris' book from the perspective of the academic community, addressing the tensions they perceive in the problematic relations between fictionalised accounts of the Holocaust history and the efforts to keep the memory of the Judeocide alive.

There are various ways in which we can read, criticise, or praise *the Tattooist*. For this roundtable, we asked the authors to focus on the issues around Holocaust narratives, ethics of fictionalisation of survivor testimonies, authenticity, memory and representation. We also asked the contributors to look beyond critical points raised by various authors and reviewers, and consider also what could be seen as positive features that Morris' book brought to the public awareness of the Holocaust. Why is there such a divide between the scholarly perception and the indisputable public success of the book? Are such tensions simply inherited in the whole nature of fictional representations of the Holocaust? Or is there something inherently unique about the way in which we should and need to approach the Holocaust, as the 'ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted' [...and certainly] not as a show' (Wiesel, 1978)?

The scholars who contributed to the roundtable represent various disciplinary perspectives on the book. Dr Samantha Mitschke is a British independent scholar, who specialises in Holocaust representation in theatre. Dr Kirril Shields is based at the University of Queensland, where he teaches Holocaust history and cultural representations of the Holocaust. Finally, Dr Anna Hirsh works as a senior archivist in the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne, the city where Lale Sokolow and Gita Furman lived after the war.

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It's a Novel, Not an Affidavit: The Case of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (Dr Samantha Mitschke, Independent Scholar)

In *The End of the Holocaust*, Alvin Rosenfeld states that as time continues to pass, it will be the job of artists and writers to portray the events of the Holocaust, and we will rely less on the records put forward by historians. To an extent this is already happening; Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Spiegelman's *Maus* are primary examples. Both are mediated narratives of true events, and can be seen to come under that audience-attracting, inherently-complex banner of 'Based on a true story.' As a Holocaust theatre scholar, I am generally wary of narratives that are proclaimed as such – alas, often with good reason. For example: in 2018 I attended a play (which shall remain nameless) that was ostensibly 'based on the true story' of a survivor; it turned out to be glaringly, factually incorrect throughout, even down to implying that the city of Warsaw was a concentration camp. Gross inferences were made about the survivor's experiences in a concentration camp, to the extent of indicating that she had had sexual relations with the commandant – an outright fabrication. The survivor in question is living, but was not invited to see the play; nor, when asked about it, was she even aware that it existed.

Such is not the case with *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. As the novelised narration of the experiences of Lale Sokolov, personally told by him to author Heather Morris, the book does not seek to exaggerate or wholly distort his story; nor does it claim to speak entirely for him. Written almost entirely in the present tense, the novel chronicles Lale's experiences during the Holocaust, centring upon his time as the titular 'tattooist of Auschwitz' and the concurring development of his romantic relationship with Gita, later his wife. From the beginning, Morris makes it clear to the reader that certain elements have been fictionalised; in the Author's Note, she declares that some characters have been created to represent more than one person, and some events have been "simplified." She asserts that the novel does not seek to tell the full history of the Holocaust, and encourages "the interested reader" to seek out sources that do. So why has so much criticism been levelled at the novel?

Could it be to do with the breaking of 'Holocaust etiquette,' the deeply-ingrained code of conduct by which most of us view the Holocaust and, subsequently, any

artworks – film, book, play or otherwise – that seek to represent it? In 1987 Terrence Des Pres defined ‘Holocaust etiquette’ in his essay ‘Holocaust *Laughter?*’ and categorised it into three prescriptions. It is the second that potentially holds the key: “Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason – artistic reasons included.” (Des Pres, 1988: 217) Given the sheer volume of artistic works dealing with the Holocaust, this is something of a stretch. However, what I find particularly interesting – and something that may have some truth in this case – is that while audiences are generally happy to overlook the relaxation of ‘without change or manipulation for any reason’ when it comes to the actual creation of an artwork, there is still an insistence on its being historically accurate. Such insistence often comes from specialists – primarily (but not limited to) academics, scholars, museums, and so on.

The primary example of this is, of course, John Boyne’s 2006 novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Untold numbers of British school children have read the book (or watched the film) and sincerely believe that it is a novelisation of a real-life story (as an educator, I have encountered such students in virtually every classroom I have taught in, and I expect this will continue to be the case for a long time). The problem is not with the actual novel itself, *per se*; it is a brilliant piece of writing, and the final sentences resound like a slap in the face. The issue is that within the covers, the book is not at all acknowledged to be entirely a work of fiction; at least, not in the edition published to tie in with the 2008 film. Many colleagues, as well as staff and students in schools where I have taught, have looked somewhat sceptical when I have pointed out that the subtitle is “a fable by John Boyne [sic].” Even though this is still only a tiny nod to the book’s status as fiction, it is still there – but only in an edition published in 2010. It is missing from the 2008 movie tie-in edition (in which, incidentally, there is a preview of Boyne’s next novel, and advertising for some of his other books). Neither edition explicitly highlights that it is fiction, nor suggests that readers undertake further research of their own. As a result, the book was often set as a required text by well-meaning English teachers who either did not know enough about the history of Auschwitz to advise their students, or were unable to ensure that contextual teaching in History classes was simultaneously undertaken.

As Auschwitz stands as a key symbol, if not *the* symbol, of the Holocaust, anything associated with its name – let alone being depicted as taking place there – is often automatically assumed to be truth. Mark M. Anderson points out the dangers of the assumption of truth – inherent in works labelled as ‘based on a true story’ – in his essay on portrayals of child victims as witnesses to the Holocaust:

These ‘true’ [...] stories become [...] [a] form of entertainment that provides [...] audiences with the ‘thrill of the real,’ with the *impression* of bumping up against an authentic historical tragedy, when in fact they offer a simplified narrative of good and evil that does not necessarily lead to

greater historical knowledge, critical awareness, or political commitment (Anderson, 2007: 3).

Yet while this is particularly pertinent in the case of Boyne's book (which, in a frankly appalling omission, includes absolutely no guidance to the reader about its veracity, nor signposts to contextual/historical resources), the same cannot be said for *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. Morris makes it explicitly clear in the Author's Note that "This is a work of fiction [...]; it is not an authoritative record of the events of the Holocaust." Moreover, one of the elements that I find most noteworthy about the book is how it implicitly encourages us to consider that we should not rely solely on one source; that we should seek out additional sources wherever possible; and that there is no one singular narrative of the Holocaust. Interestingly, it does so by causing us to question some elements of Lale's testimony.

To be clear: the book does not cast doubt on Lale as a survivor. Instead, it reminds us that human memory is fallible, and that some things may be misremembered; moreover, it supports the notion that we should approach any Holocaust narrative – testimony, novel or otherwise – with an open mind and an interest in asking questions, hence the importance of looking for additional clarification. The first aspect is Lale's incorrect memory of the number tattooed on Gita's arm: he remembered it as being 34902, when it was 4562 – as Gita stated in *her* testimony to the USC Shoah Foundation. The second is Morris' own doubts in relation to Lale's account of changing his name after liberation. Describing a visit to Lale's hometown in 2018, when she found a 1945 document proving that he had legally changed his surname to Sokolov, Morris writes (if a little patronisingly): "Good boy, I thought. You did do it officially! It was something I'd had my doubts about."

The criticism levelled against *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is understandable to an extent, especially in the age of 'fake news,' and increasing Holocaust denial and revisionism, arising from the increased global growth of the far right (particularly since 2016). The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was swift to criticise Morris' novel and assert its uselessness as a resource to those wishing to learn about the history of the camp. But *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is a novel, not an affidavit. It was never intended to be a sworn testimony or historical document. A novel is meant to convey emotion. In telling Lale's story, Morris is conveying a part of the emotions that Lale experienced to the reader, and enabling them to experience those emotions, even to a tiny extent. The sense of emotion, and empathy with the characters (in the sense of putting oneself in the position of the other, and imagining the situation from their point of view), is heightened by the fact that the novel is written in the present tense, with only brief flashbacks told in the past tense. There are those who will say that emotion is unnecessary in the learning of history. I say – as I have stated elsewhere – that in a media-saturated world, with a constant flow of immediate information about conflict and disaster, and in a global political landscape of steadily escalating rhetoric about the 'other,' we need the

engagement of emotion to urge people towards a consideration of historical events and their aftermath.

Herein lies another aspect of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* that I was struck by: as I have explored in other areas of my research, it does not fall into the trap of what Gary Weissman refers to as “sweetening or sugar-coating” the Holocaust, in that the genocide is not stripped of its horror and represented overall as a story with an ultimately joyful outcome (Weissman, 2004: 12). While the novel itself ends with the reunion of Lale and Gita on a sunny Bratislava street, an afterword by their son Gary offers personal insight into how their experiences affected their lives. For example, Lale had a “lack of emotion and heightened survival instinct,” meaning that he was even unable to cry when his sister died; when asked about it, “he said that after seeing death on such a grand scale for so many years, and after losing his parents and brother, he found he was unable to weep [...]”

There is always a danger of exaggeration, distortion and/or factual errors when writing a novel, or a play, or creating any type of artwork that deals with the Holocaust. As someone who is both a Holocaust theatre scholar and an educator who teaches Holocaust history, I stand in the tricky position of seeing both sides of the argument: the desire to create such works, and in doing so to convey something of the individual experience; and the desire to ensure historical accuracy and factuality, especially in the current socio-political climate. I actually quite like the fact that the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum conducted a full report on the novel, and declared that “Given the number of factual errors [...], this book cannot be recommended as a valuable title for persons who want to explore and understand the history of KL Auschwitz” (Flood, 2018). Even though it might seem like a damning critique, the museum does not condemn the book outright, nor in such terms as to admonish potential readers against actually reading it. The reaction of the Museum authorities highlights the expertise of their specialists and encourages readers to look beyond the novel; the novel helps to bring about additional awareness of, and interest in, Auschwitz-Birkenau. Both the novel and the historical record are important in different ways, and both need to exist in the public domain.

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The Positives and Negatives of Holocaust Clichés: Negotiating *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*

(Dr Kirril Shields, The University of Queensland)

Authors generally approach the subject of the Holocaust with reverence and ethical consideration. Generally. And while texts from all manner of genres compete for differing perspectives—Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006), for example, or Art Spiegelman's iconic *Maus* (1991)—rarely do texts veer towards the unethical or the anti-Semitic. There are, unfortunately, exceptions: Helen Dale's (Demidenko's) *The Hand that Signed the Paper* (1994) stained the Australian literary and cultural world due, in part, to its rewriting of history that justifies Jewish killing during the Second World War. Thankfully, ethically dubious books such as this are limited in number.

That is not to suggest that books that intend good rather than harm are without their problems. Numerous articles and reviews question the content of even the best intentioned of Holocaust-based publications. For example, fictional accounts like John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) frequently meet with mixed feedback despite international success. Memoirs are often criticised because of a blurred remembering on the part of the survivor. Questions arise when scriptwriters include Hollywood-esque moments that undermine truthful depictions of this past.

In a 1989 *New York Times* article, Elie Wiesel wrote on a spate of texts that he thought exploited the Holocaust: "They get a little history, a heavy dose of sentimentality and suspense, a little eroticism, a few daring sex scenes, a dash of theological rumination about the silence of God and there it is: let kitsch rule in the land of kitsch, where at the expense of truth, what counts is ratings and facile success" (Wiesel 1989). These texts are not anti-Semitic, yet authors revert to the clichéd and kitsch. For success and ratings alone however, or are there other reasons for the reappearance of tried and tested tropes?

Reverting to clichés is (by their very nature) commonplace in Holocaust text. Fiction, memoir, autobiography and biography draw on figures, moments, stories and historical details that are questionable, yet seemingly needed for authenticity's sake, or possibly for the sake of drama. The presence of Dr Josef Mengele is one example. Survivor testimonies frequently tell of a run-in with Mengele, while the plethora of other medical staff employed in the camps are marginal or never considered. Most texts incorporate cattle cars with rarely a mention of the various other forms of railway carriage—first, second and third class compartments—used to deliver Jews to camps. And these camps are almost always Auschwitz rather than the thousands of *Lager* possibilities stretched across Europe and Northern Africa.

The Tattooist of Auschwitz (2018) is an example of a well-meaning text based on a very interesting Holocaust story, which however draws on a number of contrived and over-worked Holocaust clichés. Helen Morris writes the story of a man who tattooed the arms of camp inmates, and the book is swayed, it feels, partially by a moral obligation to retell a person's life, while also hoping to entertain a popular audience. It bears the hallmarks of an author who wishes to impart a significant biography, yet in doing so needs to revert to binary duplicities: good versus bad, German versus Jew, angel versus evil, intelligence versus stupidity, cunning and resilience versus indulgence and ignorance.

There is ambiguity present, instances that might lessen absolutes and introduce nuance, including the relationship of the Jewish inmate to an SS guard. Similarly, a Jewish woman forced into sexual slavery by and with the camp commandant. A Jew forced to kill and torture others for the sake of his own survival. Towards the end of the book questions over Jewish collaboration — a complex ethical dilemma — are hinted at. Yet these do not undermine expectation. They offer glimpses into the unusual, complex, irrational and incomprehensible world of the camp system, and touch on subsequent immense philosophic quandaries, yet never veer too far from the typical nor the expected. A comment by Adam Kirsch about Holocaust fiction speaks to the book's replication of Holocaust norms:

For if people write poetry, or fiction, about the Holocaust, some of them will inevitably write bad poetry about the Holocaust. They will use Auschwitz as a tool for shock value, or for gross sentimentality, or for false gravitas. This can be a result of bad faith, deliberate exploitation of the subject; but that is seldom the case. Much more frequent is simple inadequacy to the subject: The writer believes he [sic] is saying something profound and necessary, but in fact he [sic] is spouting clichés and recycling horrors (Kirsch 2015).

One reoccurring habit singled out by Kirsch that he believes contributes to a story's inadequacies are "unexamined assumptions" (Kirsch 2015). *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is littered with these, no better exemplified than by the visit the protagonist makes to the crematoria.

It could be authorial prerogative and included for historical detail and didacticism, but the out-of-bounds gas chamber and crematoria scene sits well outside both historical knowledge and rational consideration. Why would the SS take time and effort to check the forearm of one Jew who happens to have a similar tattooed number to another? The SS did not check arm after arm of those from more than 400,000 registered prisoners who were sent to the gas chambers with tattooed numbers inked into their skin. Hence one reason for a dearth in Holocaust knowledge: who went, and how many went to their deaths via the gas chambers remains a great unknown.

Such assumptions are core to those misgivings Wiesel espied in the 1980s. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and its reliance on cliché and unexamined assumption encourages sentimentality and suspense, it offers some small inroads into questions of god (a topic broached literally in the book), and Holocaust kitsch works its way into the text in a number of places. This is not because of a yearning for fame or the monetary benefits, as Wiesel accuses those who exploit the subject in his article. It is due, I propose, to the enormity of the narrative the author inherits. To

again quote Wiesel: “Only those who lived [Auschwitz] in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so” (Wiesel 1989). The book reflects the enormity of a subject too complex for outsiders, too bizarre for the everyday individual. The author was gifted a tale that “lies on the other side of life and the other side of death” (Wiesel 1989). How might an author deal with this?

The author’s answer is to write in binaries, to fall back on literary templates and to unveil this past via clichés. Not because it makes the book any easier to write, but expectations associated with stories of the camps and the Holocaust are potent and prolific. Without certain ingredients the popular reader questions authorial thoroughness and historical authenticity. An irony becomes apparent: the reality of Auschwitz is indescribable unless experienced, and clichés an even cruder means of expressing this past, and yet today’s audiences are so reliant on certain historical tropes that texts without certain characters or particular situations “lack authenticity”. It speaks to the cultural industry of Holocaust representation that familiarises and popularises “clichés and icons” through, for example, repetition (Crowshaw 2014: 233). It also speaks to Holocaust currency and what sells, thereby what is expected, as well as to assumptions about this past that are culturally and historically embedded due to the aforementioned Holocaust industry and currency.

That is not to say that clichés altogether lack merit. Dualities outlined above clearly define right from wrong and ethically dubious sentiment as seen in *The Hand that Signed the Paper* is absent. A reliance on certain historical tropes and characters solidifies the role individuals such as Mengele played, and the importance of remembering camps such as Auschwitz edifies society. These are positives. What authors leave out, what sells as truth, what becomes remembered when much is pushed aside and forgotten, these are negatives. So too is the notoriety ascribed to a few individuals and certain locations. Select pickings from Third Reich history ascribe guilt to a small minority when the very opposite was true.

The Tattooist of Auschwitz perpetuates clichés positively and negatively: the book helps memorialise aspects of the Holocaust, including the tattooist and his legacy. Contrastingly, the book helps to solidify and perpetuate Holocaust clichés societally and historically, restricting this past to a set of reoccurring images, same-old persons and fairly bland and basic ethical considerations. In his 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature acceptance speech, Imre Kertész talks on his “refusal to indulge in simple oppositions” when discussing Auschwitz and the Holocaust (Kertész 2011:13). Kertész states: “we must know that Auschwitz, in a certain sense at least, suspended literature” (Kertész 2011:15). By contrast, Holocaust clichés reinforce binaries and are reductionist, yet they remain potently didactic due to their readability. So as much as clichés simplify, they also complicate, and this we see in Morris’s *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*.

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The Missing Testimony of Gita Furman in Heather Morris' *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*

(Dr Anna Hirsh, Jewish Holocaust Centre, Melbourne)

In Heather Morris' 2018 fictional rendering *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, the protagonist Lale is presented as a romantic hero who frequently uses his position as a 'tätowierer', tattooist of prisoner numbers, to help the target of his affections, the beautiful Gita. Based on Holocaust survivors Ludwig (known as Lou or Lale) Sokolov (formerly Eisenberg) and his wife Gita (nee Furman), Morris relates the story primarily through Lale's eyes; and it is this narrowed view that I address in this critique. By focusing on a singular perspective, the opportunity to present a more nuanced rendering of the story of this couple is diminished.

Historical fiction accommodates the imaginative vision of the author. In response, criticism has always been levelled at creative works based on the Holocaust. The immensely popular *Schindler's List* (1993), Steven Spielberg's film treatment of Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) was dismissed by Claude Lanzmann, documentary film maker of *Shoah* (1985) as "melodrama, a work of kitsch" (Loshitzky, 1997: 55) However, the film was also acknowledged as contributing to a greater awareness of the events of the Holocaust by a public who may not otherwise have any knowledge or interest. The film reached a vast international audience beyond the text version. Tracy Gold noted that the film "had a profound effect on global consciousness of what the Holocaust was (Gold, 2005: 196). More problematic texts include Jerzy Kosinsky's *The Painted Bird* (1965), which meandered from memoir into collected anecdotes and then into ultra-violent fantasies. Ruth Franklin has commented that "Now, more than forty years after the publication of *The Painted Bird*, it is no longer controversial to argue that memory itself is always a variety of fiction, because of the imaginative work our minds inevitably perform when we try to reconstruct past events" (Franklin, 2001: 115). Art Spiegelman, the son of Holocaust survivors, discarded physiological reality entirely, populating his graphic novels *Maus* with anthropomorphic animals.

Metaphor, pure fiction and combined elements from witness testimonies have long contributed to the telling of Holocaust-based novels and films.

Why then, is *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* so jarring to its critics? Heather Morris' writing is a direct line to her point. Allegory is avoided in her dramatized narrative, and counterpoints of extracts from other witness sources, recorded or written testimonies, are not strongly evident. Her emphasis is on romantic fiction, presented through the eyes of one man. This pursuit for historical romantic fiction often overrides historical accuracy, and has been criticized. The formal response by the Auschwitz museum was to reprimand Morris' method of toying with historical truth, and the museum has provided a document with factual evidence (Witek-Malicka, 2018). The museum often provides this document as a response in social media interactions to readers singing praises for the book.

While historical facts are of crucial importance, in this brief critique I want to focus on the omission of an important second voice, that of Gita Furman's, provided by her testimony. In addition to the formal historical lacunae, Morris' reliance on her conversations with an elderly Lou Sokolov as the basis for her story means exclusion of details of Gita Furman's experiences that would provide counterbalance, nuanced details and a three-dimensional portrayal of both Gita and Lou. Omission of Gita's experiences minimizes not just the depth of her personality, but removes crucial testimony of experiences that contributed towards her survival, including self-sufficiency, and the networks of female friendships she formed in Auschwitz. Morris' emphasis on Lale's heroics overshadows a reality of Gita's own register of brave actions that were largely independent of Lale, and possess historical importance in their descriptions of life in Auschwitz.

Morris initially set out to write *The Tattooist* as a screenplay, which may explain the lack of detailed visual descriptions in the text; cinematography would contribute the aesthetic details (<http://thetattooistofauschwitz.com/>). The sparse mise-en-scène and lack of detailed architectural, geographical and spatial descriptions of Auschwitz I and II can also be understood given that Morris had not been to the camps until after her book was released. However, the inclusion of a 'recreational' area that never existed as well as the often unrestricted socialization between prisoners is problematic as it downplays the highly controlled environment and constant threat of punishment, torture and death in the camp.

Despite Morris confirming that she had viewed both Gita and Lou Sokolov's Shoah Foundation video testimonies filmed in 1996, Gita's narrative is significantly underplayed in the novel.¹ Testimonies provide individualizing anchors to people and places within the overwhelming historical statistics, and they provide valuable personal perspectives and descriptions of life in the camps. While Heather Morris did not have the opportunity to personally speak to Gita, Gita's detailed and revealing testimony is an important legacy, and encapsulates Gita's desire to bear witness under the right conditions.² She spoke with high detail and dignity in the

interview. Nevertheless, Morris relied heavily on Lou's late-life recollections to construct the story.

Gita Furman as *Kanadakommando*

An example of omission at the expense of historical accuracy is the experiences of Gita's work in *Kanada*. As expressed in both the novel and her Shoah Foundation Testimony, Gita Furman worked for many months in *Kanada* (or Canada), the *Effektenlager*, or the barracks holding the personal effects removed from both the prisoners and the condemned, in Auschwitz-Birkenau (Greif, 2005: 338).³ To the female and male slave labourers in these work units, there was no illusion as to where and from whom these piles of suitcases and other personal possessions were from, or what had befallen most of them. The workers sorted through seemingly endless mountains of pillaged belongings, the material evidence of genocide; it was perhaps a psychologically much harsher job than the *tatovierer's* (Langer, 1991: 60f).⁴

Gita's descriptions of her experiences as a *Kanadakommando* clearly acknowledge how she and others in similar work details had more chance of survival. She was sheltered from harsh weather, and had access to more sustenance than others in Auschwitz. Significantly, Gita's narrative includes depictions of generosity and friendships, elements that Morris underplays in *The Tattooist* in her pursuit of romantic representation. Risky and potentially fatal acts of defiance included the smuggling of food to other women. Gita's descriptions included methods implemented by inmates to assist each other where they could, yet undertaken cautiously so as not to sacrifice themselves. 'Camp mothers', older women, frequently looked after the younger girls, and the younger girls reciprocated by looking after their 'mothers' and 'even for those who did not survive, the friendship and love of a camp family eased the horror of their miserable end' (Grunwald-Spier, 2018).

Encounters with the damned were frequent. Gita and her work unit were marched past assembled groups of Jews who had arrived on the transports and were queuing up for their execution, whose possessions would soon be combed through by Gita and her fellow workers for valuables. Suitcases contained food, and often the contents had decayed and mouldered from the journeys to Auschwitz, as well as from exposure to rain and weather.

...they already had lice and all the bugs running and it was full of dirt and damage because of the rain, and the clothing was stinky, you had to separate it, and we bundled it in twenty... apparently they went to Germany somewhere. Separated men's, women's, children's, small, big, so we have to bundle it and throw them on the other side...

Everything came in, whatever people packed, they came in from the *sauna* and everything came to be bundled ... But the transports

kept coming and coming and coming, so they, we always had what to do. The suitcases separately, the toothpaste, powder separately, whatever the women brought with them, everything had to be separated... Gita Sokolov (1996)⁵

Many survivors speak of the element of ongoing luck as crucial to their survival.⁶ Gita's luck at this point included a supervising SS officer who was not just kind to the girls under his command, but actively assisted them to avoid death through his position and knowledge. In addition to having a less brutal supervisor, a network of female camaraderie also emerges as a crucial element of survival:

... when I was in the *Außenarbeit* (outdoor work), it was a different barrack where I was sleeping...when I came into the *Kanada* they had to keep us clean so we were (put) into other barracks. And we were lucky this way when our *Hauptscharführer*, when he found out there would be a *sortiren*, selection, he told us we would have to work overtime and he would come with us to the gate, where we would walk in without any interruption, they wouldn't select us...

...and that time I had flat typhus ...And two girls were holding me...I had high temperature, how I got, survived it I don't know. But we had lemon there, and we had food there and the girls were feeding me and I had lemon if I was thirsty, and they kept me on top of the clothing so that no one would see that I am sick, otherwise I would be a goner, not from the *Hauptscharführer*, he looked after his *kommando*... Gita Sokolov (1996)⁷

However, in *The Tattooist*, Morris mostly discards Gita's testimony of historical nuances and personal experiences, and maintains a binary of Lale as the active provider, and Gita as passive receiver of her lover's altruism; Morris describes Lale stuffing food, jewels and other contraband under his mattress, obtained from his *Kanada* contacts.

In the case of Gita's fight with deadly typhus, Morris does not state that it was lemon that saves Gita, supplied by her fellow *Kanadakommandos*, obtained from a storehouse of incoming goods; instead a vial of liquid medicine provided by Lale is dispensed by Dana and Ivana, which provides a rapid cure (Morris, 2018: 85). When Lale meets with Gita next, "She wears a long woollen coat...It has deep pockets and Lale fills them with food before he sends her back to the block to rest" (Morris, 2018: 87). This narrowed narrative diminishes not just Gita's story, but the survival of many women in Auschwitz, nearly all of whom did not have a redeeming male hero.

Gita testified about having to dig through pots of *schmaltz* in *Kanada* - rendered fat often flavoured with onions - brought for the high calorie value from the ghettos,

but which often obscured gemstones hidden by their owners who still clung to the hope of resettlement in the east. While the women in the sorting unit sifted through the tasty grease for the jewels, they also helped themselves to this valuable, calorie-rich foodstuff, aware of its nutritional value.

Transports from the ghettos came in, they had fat with onion and this we had to throw away because there was quite a bit of jewellery, there we found a bit of jewellery, so what we had to put away, but before we came to the bottom, we had some bread with some fat...

Gita Sokolov (1996)⁸

Morris' decision not to include Gita's narrative lends to a different interpretation of *schmaltz*, where romance triumphs over all. While Morris emphasizes Lale's food distribution activities, Gita was an active part of her own network of smuggling, assisting the sick, and, on one occasion, contributing food to a pre-Yom Kippur meal: an act of faith-motivated resistance.⁹ I also view this persistence of spiritual faith in the context of her post-Holocaust observances. Gita, as with the other women in her work detail, had access to women who worked sorting footwear or coats; the women helped and traded with each other. These acts of defiance occurred through mutual cooperation, trust and genuine altruism, and appear greater than the *singularity* of romantic love that Morris insistently presses upon the reader.

We could go from one barrack to another, till it was dark, to visit, if you knew somebody was sick, of the girls ...we knew each other so we went to see them...From Kanada, if there wasn't a *sortierer*, to check us, so we could smuggle in some food. Like a sardine, or ... whatever we could smuggle in, so we gave to the girls who were inside who didn't have an opportunity. Gita Sokolov (1996).¹⁰

The women were cautious, and kept watch for each other, and surreptitiously warned each other if there was a chance of being caught with contraband: "Everybody dropped everything...so that you are not caught with smuggling in stuff...on the floor, you moved away, because it wasn't yours anymore."¹¹ These friendship networks amongst women appear to be the obverse of Morris' portrayals of Lale's predominantly solo acts of valor and chivalry.

In the harsh circumstances of Auschwitz, the numerous stories of friendships that developed between female (and male) prisoners reinforce how important these bonds were, both for the sense of self (inwards) as well as a reminder of human connection (outwards). Physician Gisela Perl wrote:

The nine members of the hospital staff formed a small oasis in the swamp of misery and crime which was Auschwitz. Their selection was an outcome of Mengerle's (sic) whim, but I firmly believe that Fate must have guided his hand. These nine women were nine real

human beings. We saw things as a whole, and forgot our personal fate in the fight for others. We were the only ones who offered help to the needy by listening to their stories, giving them courage, and treating their diseased bodies to the best of our ability.

Gisela Perl (1948, 1987: 89f.)

Morris' heavy focus on the couple's romance is taken to the extreme through the implausible scenarios of frequent 'dates' and sexual activity, which in the context of reality are most problematic.

Lale and Gita see each other on Sundays when possible. On these days they mingle among other bodies, sneaking touches. Occasionally they can steal time together alone in Gita's block. This keeps them committed to staying alive and, in Lale's case, planning a shared future. Gita's Kapo is getting fat from the food Lale brings her.

Heather Morris (2018: 157)

Morris' representation of a romantic and sexual relationship in the dark space of Auschwitz is an anomaly, and disrupts the reality of a concentration camp in the Holocaust. It is my view that it is not helpful to represent Auschwitz in such an imagined way to readers who may not have much or any historical knowledge of its horrific details and reality.

In the Holocaust, women were subjected to ongoing gender-specific humiliation, violence and trauma. Morris' insinuation of romantic sex as the antithesis of death may translate disrespectfully as this type of activity between (Jewish) prisoners was so minimal and does not accurately capture the risk of punishment and death. Descriptions of Lale and Gita's courtship and sexual activities are presented as something quite normal, but instead, they irritate historical reality. Morris does not seem concerned by criticism, but accepts that she has discarded much dark reality. Journalist Fiona Harari has presented a detailed analysis and critique of Morris, including the author's response to the backlash: "She accepts part of the criticism, particularly in not depicting Auschwitz as graphically as many others have. "That was the biggest challenge I had. What to leave out about what was evil." To have included more details, she says, "would have made it into a document or a historical document more than a love story" (Harari, 2019).

At the time of writing this, Morris' recently released sequel, based on Gita's friend Cilka, is already under intense scrutiny and criticism, including by Cilka's stepson. In *The Tattooist*, Cilka is described by fictionalized Gita in the novel as "Cilka is the plaything of Schwartzhuber [the SS commander of the camp]" (Morris, 2018: 157; Sinnreich, 2010: 111).¹² Given Gita's eloquent manner and insightful and sensitive descriptions in her testimony, this phrase appears to be quite incongruous.

Conclusion

Individual stories by Holocaust survivors provide compelling narratives. The fictionalization and romanticization of Lale Sokolov's experiences in Auschwitz

have been demonstrated to be challenging to historical accuracy. Transforming actual events of the Holocaust into creative writing is nothing new, but Heather Morris' steadfast reliance on conversations she shared with Lale Sokolov's towards the end of his life have contributed to a simplification that narrows understanding of the reality of Auschwitz. Creative license *is* a writer's privilege, but when historical truth is cast off for melodrama and sexy love scenes, the audience ultimately loses out. Although Morris has conveyed the story of Lale solely through his voice, this technique has flattened representation of Gita Furman. Gita's articulation of her experiences run counter to some of the details in scenes portrayed in *The Tattooist*.

Adaptations of Holocaust testimonies have long been utilized from and through various media, and fiction writers are under no obligation to adhere to historical truth. With the right of response, criticism of representations of the Holocaust in various artistic incarnations has always been vocal. While artistic license and creative freedoms are cherished, sometimes the ethical imperatives of accuracy are lost, and the misery of others, in this case both victims and survivors of Auschwitz, may be perceived as being exploited through commercial 'hooks' of sex and sensationalism.

Endnotes

¹ "...this is why it comes out as an historical fiction book – I had to put thoughts and memories into Gita's head and into other people. Lale didn't know them, of course not. Lottie gave me a lot and – another thank you I need to give but, as long as he doesn't hear, I kind of plagiarized him a little bit – that Steven Spielberg. He had his Shoah Foundation send people all around the world and they were recording the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. And they came to Melbourne and both Lale and Gita gave testimonies. And Lale had copies of those testimonies. So here I had two hours of Gita on video telling what went on and how she felt." Heather Miller in interview with Meaghan Dew, Kill Your Darlings, First Podcast Event (transcript at: <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/podcast/kyd-first-book-club-event-the-tattooist-of-auschwitz/> undated, Autumn 2018. Accessed July 2019.

² Gary Sokolov, Gita and Lou's only child, also gave a testimony to the JHC, on 10 April 2018, after the book was released. He states that his mother was rarely able to talk about her experiences to him. Ten years before her death, she woke up and said to Lou "I can't live with this number anymore, I need to have it removed." She had the number removed. Apart from that was the usual, eat eat eat, we don't want you to go hungry, try everything because we missed out on our childhood." Gary Sokolov, Jewish Holocaust Centre, Melbourne, 2018. Timestamp: 00:40.28

³ Greif describes the extensive physical set up of *Kanada* within the grounds of Birkenau, and the origins of its name "Because of the enormous, unimaginable wealth that accumulated in the microcosm of the *Effektenlager*, the sorters had the impression that they were handling the riches of a country like Canada, which Poles considered the epitome of wealth. It was a desperate, or cynical attempt to give a name to the isolated, contained world of the objects.

⁴ Langer reflects on another of the female *Kanadakommando*: "Irene W has not plucked her private pessimism from the unfeatured air; she offers it after two hours of testimony about her camp experiences, including six months in the *Kanadakommando* (a work details whose job was to sort out the clothing and belongings of those sent directly to their death) in Auschwitz.

- ⁵ Gita Sokolov, Shoah Foundation Testimony, Melbourne, 1996. Timestamp second video 00.17.02 to 00.19.05
- ⁶ Testimonies held at the Jewish Holocaust Centre attesting to the element of luck, include Abram Goldman and Kitia Altman.
- ⁷ Gita Sokolov, 1996. Timestamp second video 00.19.10
- ⁸ Gita Sokolov, 1996. Timestamp, second video, 00.21.55.
- ⁹ See Moshe Idel's discussion on the schism of redemptive faith, with a major point as Holocaust, in his review of Yosef H. Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Some Observations*, The Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 97, No. 4 (Fall, 2007), p. 492, University of Pennsylvania Press, "The more dramatic changes (of faith) are well known: the Holocaust, the shift from the largest concentration of Jews in Europe to Asia and North America".
- ¹⁰ Gita Sokolov, 1996, timestamp, second video 00.24.00
- ¹¹ Gita Sokolov, 1996. Timestamp, second video 00.28.48
- ¹² Sinnreich includes witness statements of prisoners in Auschwitz regarding the rape of Jewish women.

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