THE TATTOOIST OF AUSCHWITZ

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Abstract:This article aims at revealing once more the unbelievable atrocities of the greatest humanitarian tragedy witnessed by humanity: the Holocaust. Heather Morris' novel "The Tattooist of Auschwitz" is an amazing document reminding us of the millions of innocent Jews and gypsies tortured and murdered in the Nazi hells: the concentration camps. Auschwitz, the dismal world in between the normal life led by Lale Sokolov and Gita before the war and the inferno where despair and death rule. This article is a warning that we are not to ignore or forget what happened more than seventy years ago because it might happen again if we are irresponsible.

Keywords:Concentration camp, document, anti-Semitism, death, love.

Heather Morris' novel "The Tattooist of Auschwitz" is one of the heart-wrenching documents which aim at reminding humanity of the greatest massacre ever: the Holocaust. The protagonist himself confessed that he had agreed to tell his frightening story three years before his death, so that "it would never happen again"(Morris, 2018: 261).

This article undertakes to warn against a rising anti-Semitic movement. Just as we are listening to so many horrifying tales about innocent people being tortured, beaten, famished to death, shot, gassed, cremated, about forty per cent of the population of our planet have never heard about the Holocaust, and nationalists and neo-Nazis vandalize Jewish graveyards and synagogues, humiliate or even murder Jewish people.

When the National Socialists and the 'Hitler Jugend' started raising their voices in the Germany of the 1930's, very few foresaw the growing hate, while the majority were mistakenly confident in common sense and reason. We should be vigilant and stifle the signs of racism and anti-Semitism only too visible nowadays.

Teenagers who have read Anne Frank's "The Diary of a Young Girl" are not likely to have anti-Semitic or racist ideas. Her sincere self-scrutiny and too early coming of age is at the same time a precious document and proof of survival in hiding from Nazi raids for twenty-five months, of human solidarity and compassion. Anne's journal, miraculously saved from destruction by her father, the only survivor of the Franck family, is the desperate confession of an adolescent who was confronted with the worst crisis in human history. Before her deportation to Auschwitz, Anne Frank faced painful confinement, deprivation, and fear. Notwithstanding, she read voraciously and studied diligently only to die pitifully soon after her imprisonment in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Her book will hopefully be a red flag for all responsible readers.

David Foenkinos' novel "Charlotte" brings the shocking life story of Charlotte Salomon, the forgotten and rediscovered expressionist German painter murdered in Auschwitz, in 1943. She had to take refuge in the South of France and found shelter in the house of an American woman, who prevented her and her grandparents from being deported. By doing this she made it possible for Charlotte Salomon to create her short life's work: "Life? or Theatre?". For two years she worked in a frenzy and the result was a 'Gesamtwerk' consisting of more than seven hundred gouaches which tell her story, one of hate, horror, and of lost love. Interestingly, Charlotte's collection of astounding paintings is accompanied by illustrative texts which mark the major moments of her life. Moreover, aiming at a semiotic

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unity of her work, she indicated the music – among which Schubert songs but also Nazi marches - which should complete the artistic universe she imagined. This shocking work of art is Charlotte's legacy and warning that this might well happen again if we are not watchful.

Edith Eva Eger, a survivor of the Holocaust and a renowned clinical psychologist, made her destiny known to the world in "The Choice", a novel she completed at the age of ninety. On arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau together with her parents and sister, Magda, Edith was separated from her mother and father who were gassed that very day. For more than a year the two sisters endured unimaginable agonies. Edith's dream of becoming a dancer had been shattered long ago. Her body and soul were broken: "Our bones look obscene, our eyes are caverns, blank, dark, empty. Hollow faces. Blue-black fingernails. We are trauma in motion. We are a slow-moving parade of ghouls" (Eger 2017, 96).

As an immigrant in America she made huge efforts to forget and forgive those who had ruined her and her sister's lives and had killed her parents. She ultimately forgave, but never forgot. Late in life Edith Eger decided to go back to Auschwitz "searching for the feel of death so that I could finally exorcise it. What I found was my inner truth, the self I wanted to reclaim, my strength and my innocence" (Eger 2017, 357). More than seventy years later, as a patient and wise therapist, she was pleased to have helped traumatized people rediscover forgiveness and serenity.

In "The Librarian of Auschwitz" Antonio Iturbe, a Spanish writer and journalist, portrays a fourteen year old Jewish girl from Prague, deported together with her parents to Auschwitz from the Terezin ghetto. Brutally transplanted from her comfortable home to the horrendous reality of Block 31, the children's block, she was asked to safe keep the eight books which had been smuggled past the guards. She agreed and became the secret 'librarian of Auschwitz', thus seriously endangering her life. Books were severely forbidden in concentration camps: "It wasn't an extensive library. In fact, it consisted of eight books and some of them were in poor condition. But they were books. In this incredibly dark place, they were a reminder of less sombre times, when words rang out more loudly than machine guns" (Iturbe 2017, 17). The precious eight books were a world atlas, a geometry textbook, a Russian grammar, a novel written in Russian, Freud's "New Paths to Psychoanalytic Thought", "The Count of Monte Cristo", "A Short History of the World" by H.G. Wells and Dita's favourite, "The Adventures of the Good Soldier Svejk" by the Czech author Jaroslav Hasek. Dita Adler's task was to hide these books in a secret compartment and to distribute them when needed for 'classes'. The eight books and the 'living' ones – well-read inmates who were able to speak in extenso about books they almost knew by heart - were the only pillars of life and culture in the Hell of Auschwitz. Almost miraculously, Dita Adler, later on Kraus, survived and immigrated to Israel. This novel stands proof that even in a horrible place like Auschwitz people and books can survive to convey a message to our contemporaries: such a tragedy should never happen again.

Unlike Anne Frank and Charlotte Salomon, Edith Eger, Dita Kraus, Lale Sokolov and Gita prevailed over hatred and murder but were bound to carry the huge load of their trauma for the rest of their lives. In the afterword of the novel, Lale's only son, Gary Sokolov remembers how all through their lives his parents' constant focus was food and how they were proud of "a fridge filled with chicken schnitzels, cold cuts and myriad cakes and fruit" (Morris 2018, 265). Never could they forget what hunger and starvation meant. Gary also recalls that they could never gather the strength to speak about their descent into the underworld of the Nazi camps. Nevertheless, they wanted him to know and to remember.

Lale and Gita succeeded to emerge from the abyss of the Nazi camps, from this world of murder, a realm of in-between, where the prisoners did not live but made inhuman efforts to survive, into their former lives. For so many of them it meant coming back from the very brink of death. In her book Edith Eger relives the petrifying moment when she was

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discovered by American soldiers on a heap of disfigured skeletal corpses. Her rescue and survival had depended on a second and an almost unnoticeable gesture. She never forgot the sight, smell and taste of the handful of M&M candies she was offered by her American saviour.

Lale Sokolov too witnessed such horrifying scenes during his imprisonment in Auschwitz-Birkenau. This is why, even more than fifty years on, Lale was not able to weep when his sister died. When asked, he confessed 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" (Morris 2018, 269). He had been there - in that other life of torture and horror – too many times. But he did cry when Gita died because he had lost the other half of himself. Their life of immense love and resilience stands proof of their victory over darkness and death.

In 2003 Heather Morris, an Australian scriptwriter and novelist met an elderly gentleman who had a story to tell to the world. It proved to be a heart-breaking tale of suffering and surviving. It was Lale Sokolov's confession about the years he spent in Auschwitz and the touching love story between him and Gita Furman. Told in the third person singular, the storyline follows, on the one hand, Lale and the other prisoners' desperate fight for survival against all odds, and a romance born in a place where horror and hate reigned, on the other hand. Thus, Nazi hate and Jewish love are intertwined all through the novel.

When they first met, Lale asked Heather Morris what she knew about Jews and was pleased to find out that she didn't know much. The novelist, in exchange, confessed that, although she was a Kiwi, she had German ancestors. Significantly, his answer was: "We all come from somewhere" (Morris 2018, 260). Soon after his wife's death, in 2003 and three years before his own passing away, he decided to open his heart and, finally, come to terms with their dark past. Just like Edith Eger he had needed a lifetime to forgive, but didn't want us to forget. Unlike doctor Eger, Lale Sokolov could not go back to Auschwitz. Notwithstanding, he decided to leave a trace, but knew that his time was running out fast as he had to join his beloved Gita.

For twelve years Lale and Gita's story was a screenplay, but in 2018 the novel was published and it raised a lot of interest among the reading public. In 2018 Heather Morris and a group of three hundred students from Australia and the United States joined the 'March of the Living' at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the symbolical denial and revolt against the 'Death March' back in 1945, when the SS was desperate to exterminate the last of the survivors. For the author of "The Tattooist of Auschwitz" walking close to the barracks and the crematoria, treading the same ground as the prisoners of the concentration camp left a deep, painful and eternal mark on her consciousness: "A moment in my life now scarred into my memory, and my love for Lale went to another level" (Morris 2018, 295). Later that year, the novelist visited Lale's hometown, Krompachy. This provincial Slovak town impressed by its "idyllic setting: a beautiful, colourful, tree-lined small town with a babbling stream running through it" (Morris 2018, 297). In a mysterious way, the novelist resonated with Lale, the schoolboy, adolescent and twenty-four year old youth before April 1942, when he was deported. The streets, the school he went to, the river, where he sometimes bathed, seemed to bear his imprint. The past and its devastating consequences forced itself into the picture at the sight of Lale's former home, then an abandoned shop with timber-covered windows. Following the trail of Lale's life backwards, Morris discovered his birth certificate by the name of Lajos/Ludwig Eisenberg, to which a note was added in 1945 and which signalled the change of his surname into Sokolov, a decision taken in order to escape the communist hunt this time.

In Krompachy Heather Morris did the right thing: she addressed a group of fifty to sixty senior students and told them the extraordinary story of Lale and Gita and their

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unwavering resolve to survive, at the same time warning them: "Make your way, live your life, but never forget your past" (Morris 2018, n.p.). Taking this journey to Krompachy and retracing Lale's past, delving into the beginnings of his life and, at the same time, the novelist overarched past and present encapsulating a hiatus, the Auschwitz underworld.

Lale's tragic story started in April 1942, when together with countless young men crammed in wagons meant for transporting livestock, he was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. He had reported to the Krompachy government department in the hope that the rest of the family, his parents, his brother and sister would be spared deportation to labour camps. He never found out that his parents and brother had lost their lives in concentration camps.

The horrific journey lasted for two days. Many of the prisoners succumbed to the inhuman conditions and the lack of space, water and food: "He hears the grumbling of empty stomachs and the rasping of dry windpipes. He smells piss and shit and the odour of bodies too long unwashed" (Morris 2018, 7). SS officers, fire guns, barking dogs, yells, Rudolf Hoess, and the German words 'Arbeit macht frei' meant the beginning of the Nazi terror. His being marked with the number 32407, which would accompany him his whole life, the endless merciless humiliations when taking a shower, losing his hair to a razor, having to wear a heavy old Russian uniform and boots in pouring rain, witnessing the shooting of fellow prisoners according to the whims of German officers strengthened his determination to prevail: "I will live to leave this place. I will walk out a free man. If there is a hell, I will see these murderers burn in it" (Morris 2018, 17). These unspoken words repeated in all the difficult moments spent in Auschwitz were a pillar of resistance and determination for Lale Sokolov, even when the infamous doctor Mengele held his pistol to the tattooist's temple, ready to pull the trigger. No matter how inhuman and desperate life conditions, despite the fact that surviving at Auschwitz often meant walking on a razor edge, he never stopped fighting for life and constantly helped others survive, his motto being: "If you wake up in the morning, it is a good day" (Morris 2018, 262). The nightmarish existence in Auschwitz-Birkenau meant fighting hell in order to prevail.

Work was exhausting and for many the straight way to death. Prisoners had to move huge blocks of stone from one side of a field to the other and back again – a crowd of famished emaciated Sisyphuses savagely driven by the Nazi 'gods'. The last to arrive was shot: "Lale needs to use all of his strength. His muscles ache but his mind stays strong. On one occasion he is the second last to arrive" (Morris 2018, 185). He understood very soon that he had to bow his head and keep quiet, observe, watch the SS officers and acquire useful knowledge. Sarcastically, prisoners, among whom Lale, were forced to build new housing blocks for the prisoners to come: "You will continue with the construction of the camp. We have many more people to transport here."(Morris 2018, 22) Thus, the prisoners had to build the prisons for fellow victims. Soon after his arrival Lale witnessed a horrifying scene: a crowd of naked men was pushed into an old bus which had been converted into a gas chamber. Before the captives died, the bus started to shake violently and muted screams were heard. This was the moment when Lale collapsed and for the next seven days and nights he was on the brink of death with a broken heart and typhoid fever. He was brought back to life by fellow prisoners who smuggled water, forced bread down his throat and changed his soiled clothes with those of dead men.

Soon after his recovery, due to the fact that he spoke Slovakian, German, Russian, French, Hungarian, and Polish he was allowed to join the 'Politische Abteilung', became the 'Tatowierer', was constantly monitored by a guard, Baretsky and, implicitly, benefited from a number of advantages. By burning numbers into men and women's flesh, by reducing them to these numbers, the tattooist went deeper into the very depth of the Nazi Hell. Just as his fellows had shared their bread with him, Lale concealed his extra rations of bread under his sleeve and offered them to the hungry captives. Solidarity and humaneness bloomed on this

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barren soil of a hell on Earth, and proved to be the only way to save lives. "To save one is to save the world" (Morris 2018, 35) was a major commandment in those days of starvation.

In this place, where death reigned over innocent human beings and mortal danger was lurking from behind every single corner, in July 1942, Lale found the love of a lifetime and longer, Gita, prisoner 34902, a number tattooed by Lale himself into the tender skin of this young woman whose destiny would be inextricably connected to Lale's: "For the second time they peer into each other's soul. Lale's heart skips a beat. The gaze lingers" (Morris 2018, 52). Love made life in this hellish in-between world bearable for both Gita and Lale.

The tattooist continued to use his privileged position to keep her alive by smuggling extra food and, when she fell ill with typhoid fever, even penicillin. Hard times were yet to come for Lale. While exchanging jewellery and currency, which the prisoners found in dead prisoners' clothes, for sausages, chocolate or even medicine, which kept starving or ill prisoners alive, he was caught and tortured ferociously. The SS officers wanted him to give the names of those who were involved in these secret transactions. The cell in the punishment block proved to be a worse hell than the Hell he had already known: "For two days he sits in the cell, the only light coming in through a crack under the door. While he listens to the cries and screams of others, he relives every moment he has spent with Gita" (Morris 2018, 173). The torture cell became for Lale the vortex of the world suspended between his past life, of which he was frequently dreaming, and an unknown realm from a time to come after this nightmarish experience. Gratefulness and humaneness brought Lale back to life one more time. His torturer, Yakub, a prisoner and a Jew like himself, spared his life by advising him to feign fainting, thus helping him escape death sentence by shooting at the Black Wall. The torturer was paying his victim a debt of honour: Lale had fed him smuggled food when he was in danger of dying of starvation. This precipice in which human beings were dehumanized and destroyed was against all expectations governed by the victims' loyalty, self-sacrifice, and their iron will to prevail. The beaten, broken Lale, covered in blood, and not able to walk would live to see another day. No one was expected to survive or be released from the so-called 'Strafkompanie' or 'Penal Unit'. And yet, Lale won still another battle. Paradoxically, even in those moments of extreme danger the solidarity among inmates saved a life. And again the half-dead Lale was fed and looked after by fellow prisoners and survived: "He can't make it to supper. I'll bring him some of mine. He's gonna need it tomorrow" (Morris 2018, 182).

In the extermination camps physical devastation was doubled by psychic torment. After resuming his work as tattooist and risking his life by trading food for inmates who were in great need, Lale witnessed a heart-wrenching scene: in the dead of night the Gypsy camp was evacuated. All the convicts, children, women and men were tossed into trucks and disappeared into the night. Soon their mortal remains were going up into the gloomy sky in the form of smoke and ashes. Even Gita could not wipe out the tattooist's grief: "They have both withstood, for more than two and a half years, the worst of humanity. But this is the first time she's seen Lale sink to this depth of depression" (Morris 2018, 203). Survivors, women and men, most of them not having reached the age of twenty-one, have been damaged for the rest of their lives. Never would they become what they had dreamed of. Their future lives had been disrupted and tainted by visions of horror.

When in January 1945 the Russian troops advanced towards Auschwitz, Gita and Lale were separated. All the surviving women were marched towards an unknown place across the frozen Polish fields. Many of them collapsed on the way and were shot by the captors. Gita and four Polish girls managed to flee while thousands of women were crammed in cattle wagons – they were being taken away just as they had been brought to Auschwitz. The five fugitives found shelter with locals for a while but danger still loomed from two directions: the

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German shooting maniacs and the Russian drunk rapists. With the last of her strength Gita finally arrived in Bratislava where she shared crowded apartments with camp survivors.

Lale and the remaining men left Auschwitz and were taken to Mauthausen camp, in Austria. Later, he found himself in another camp in Vienna from where, like Gita, he evaded walking through woods, constantly in danger of being shot by either Germans or Russians. Once again he narrowly escaped death: "He hauls himself out and drags his drenched body into the trees, before collapsing in shivers and passing out" (Morris 2018, 229). Finally, after having been used by the Russian officers (who were pillaging luxurious houses and taking advantage of young women who sold themselves for food, jewellery or money) Lale arrived in Krompachy, his hometown, where he found the only surviving member of his family, his sister Goldie, who had married a Russian.

The road to Gita and Lale's former life was not a smooth one: barriers and dangers made their ascent to normality painful. In addition, the home they had left behind was unrecognizable: "The palings of the front fence are gone, leaving just the twisted posts. The flowers, once his mother's pride and joy, are strangled by weeds and overgrown grass. Rough timber is nailed over a broken window" (Morris 2018, 249).

Back in the after-war chaotic world, Lale desperately searched for the love of his life. After acquiring a cart drawn by a horse in exchange for the gems he had secretly saved, Lale embarked upon looking for Gita in Bratislava. Destiny finally worked in favour of the couple: "Clearly Lale is not going to move, or is incapable of moving, so Gita walks to him. Kneeling down in front of him, she says, 'In case you didn't hear me when we left Birkennau, I love you.'"(Morris 2018, 254). Lale and Gita got married in October 1945, and soon after their marriage they changed their name from Eisenberg to the Russian-sounding name, Sokolov. Despite the war-ravaged and Soviet-controlled Slovakia, Lale started a successful business in fabrics which he sold to manufacturers across the country. For a while they spent a prosperous life, all the while supporting a strong movement to establish a Jewish state in Israel. Soon enough their activities were reported to the authorities and Lale was imprisoned again, in April 1948. This time he was considered to be a political prisoner and his business was nationalized two days later. With the help of friends they found themselves one more time on the run, fleeing to Vienna first and then to Paris. Finally, they set sail for Australia and in 1949 settled in Melbourne, where Lale started again a business in fabrics while his wife designed women's clothing. In 1961 Gita gave birth to their only son, Gary. Ultimately, they had succeeded in leaving behind the inferno of Auschwitz, of hate and death, of deprivation and starvation, of imprisonment and torture. They had finally overcome all injustices and persecutions; they had left for good the insane world of in-between, and reached the shore of a reasonable world. Although stigmatized for life, they both managed to forgive the wrong doers, but they never forgot.

While writing Lale and Gita's story, Heather Morris did not only retell horrific moments in their lives, but created a historical document for generations to come: "'The Tattooist of Auschwitz" is a story of two ordinary people, living in an extraordinary time, deprived not only of their freedom but their dignity, their names, and their identities, and it is Lale's account of what they needed to do to survive" (Morris 2018, 262). Lale Sokolov died on 31 October 2006, three years after his beloved Gita.

If a diary, a novel about two sisters who survived the horrors of the extermination camp or a document about an 'avant la lettre' artist, who did not escape the Nazi mass murdering, or the story of a fourteen year old librarian, guardian of a secret library in Auschwitz or that of the tattooist of Auschwitz and the woman he fell in love with, all stand proof for a huge mistake humanity made when it ignored the danger of the Nazi regime.

I wish we were able to contradict the statement made by a rabbi on the occasion of a Jewish funeral in Jonathan Safran Foer's "Here I Am": "Survival has been the central theme

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and imperative of Jewish existence since the beginning, and not because we chose it to be that way…We are a traumatized people. And nothing else has trauma's power to deform the mind and heart." (Foer 2017, 420).

Yet this is not only a pleading for Jews, gypsies or 'inferior' citizens but also for all those innocent people who are oppressed or die for no guilt whatsoever. Today when nationalism, populism, racism, chauvinism, and terrorism raise their gruesome heads again, we have the responsibility and duty to prevent torment and crime.

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