

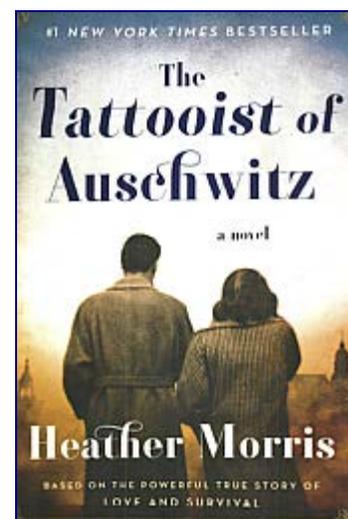
Site Map: [MAIN](#) / [A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2](#) [Webpage](#) [Printer Ready](#)



*A READER'S JOURNAL*

**The Tattooist of Auschwitz**  
A Novel  
by  
**Heather Morris**

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment  
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2019



*"I tattooed her number on her left hand, and  
she tattooed her number in my heart."  
— Lale Sokolev*

"A powerful true story of love and survival" promises the cover of this paperback book and almost invisible on the back cover are the words of the hero of this novel, Lale Sokolev. I had already decided to read this book before I read the above words on the book cover. I had recently read a book about a man sentenced under penalty of death to spend the rest of his life in a hotel in Moscow and didn't wish to read about another imprisoned man, this time in a concentration camp subject to execution for looking crossways at a prison guard. My decision to read it came from watching my wife as she read this book: her intense interest as she turned the pages told me this was a book I wanted to read. Lale spoke Slovak, German, Russian, French, Hungarian, and a little Polish which makes him valuable as a tattooist for the camp. He shows up each day, sits down at a small table with some ink and a block of wood with a nail sticking out one side. Each person in the line stops to have their number tattooed into their arm by Lale. "Just do your job," he was told, do not talk to or look at each person, "just put their number on their arm and go to the next person." He works assisting another tattooist and Lale becomes the main tattooist with an assistant working with him. And soon he meets a girl that he had earlier tattooed.

**[page 49, 50] It is a Sunday when he sees her. He recognizes her at once. They walk toward each other, Lale on his own, she with a group of girls, all with shaven heads, all wearing the same plain clothing. There is nothing to distinguish her except for those eyes. Black — no, brown. The darkest brown he'd ever seen. For the second time, they peer into each other's souls. Lale's heart skips a beat. The gaze lingers.**

His new friend Baretski yells at him, "Tätowierer!" to get his attention away from the girl. He offers to help Lale write to the girl, but any kind of writing is forbidden and he declines the offer. But later as he comes to trust Baretski, he gives him the girl's number, which is his only way of identifying her, 34902, and Baretski gives him pencil and paper to write to her. Unable to think of anything else, he writes, "Hello, my name is Lale," and plans to meet her on Sunday near the administration building. In all too brief a meeting, he asks her name, and a girl in her group says, "Gita". Their next meeting is longer, in the back of the building, and they get to talk. Gita will not tell him her last name or where she was from. Lale asks her, "How's your day been?" This elicits a voluble response from the otherwise terse Gita, "Oh, you

know how it is. Got up, had a big breakfast, kissed Mama and Papa goodbye before catching the bus to work. . ." Lale, whose breakfast consists only of tepid coffee and a dry piece of bread, says, "Sorry, dumb question." In a place where there is almost no food at all, there were few things to talk about how the day was going and Gita wouldn't give him any personal information about herself, only her number. As they part, the author writes, "She breaks eye contact, but maintains her spell over him with a smile that makes his knees go weak." (Page 67)

Lale is puzzled by the kind of place he was imprisoned in.

**[page 69] *Who are those people?* Lale has been asking himself this question ever since he arrived in the camp. The groups of men who work on the construction sites who appear every day dressed in civilian clothing, never to be seen after "tools down." With a spring in his step from his time with Gita, Lale feels sure he can talk to a couple of the men without the SS getting worked up and taking a shot at him. And he has his bag-shaped shield.**

Lale carries a bag which identifies him as a Tätowierer (Tattooist) and which mostly gives him free rein to walk in the camp. He notices brick buildings under construction, but they have not been utilized as crematoriums yet.

**[page 69] Lale strolls casually toward one of the new brick buildings under construction. These don't seem to be blocks to house prisoners, but their use is of no concern to Lale today. He approaches two men, one older than the other, busily engaged in bricklaying, and squats down beside a pile of bricks awaiting placement.**

He makes friends with the bricklayer Victor and learns that he and his brother live in the area around the camp and work for wages building these concrete structures call crematoriums. Victor shares a piece of sausage and offers it to Lale. The younger man is upset, but Victor says, "See us tomorrow. I'll have more for you. Hell, if we can help just one of you, we'll do it." From this encounter Lale begins an active surreptitious trading with Victor. The girls in Gita's block are tasked with removing valuables from the corpses and some of the girls trade precious stones, silver and gold jewelry to Lale for the scraps of food he acquires from Victor. The girls are searched, but work out a place they can store their purloined treasure in a rag outside the building where their toilet it. At last a tiny bit of humanity has found its way into Lale's life.

Sometimes they pass the treasures while the mob of girls walk back to their bunks for the night.

**[page 76] Not far from the women's compound, Lale catches up with two friends. They see him coming and slow their pace, dropping back into the mob of girls trudging "home." He holds the bundles in one hand, the open bag in the other, and nudges the girls. Without looking at him, each girl drops something into his bag, and he in turn presses the food into their hands. They shove it up their sleeves. Lale and the girls split away from each other at the entrance to the women's compound.**

**Lale doesn't know what he will find in the four pieces of rag that he places on his bed. He opens them gently. They contain coins and Polish zloty bills, loose diamonds, rubies and sapphires, gold and silver rings emblazoned with precious stones. Lale steps back, knocking into the door behind him. He is recoiling from the sad provenance of these objects, each one attached to a momentous event in the life of its previous owner.**

The other part of the transaction takes place the next day during a handshake with Victor who palms the treasure and drops some packages of food in Lale's bag, whispering to him, "Happy New Year." Lale was one of the few prisoners in the camp who knew what day it was because it appeared each morning on the top of the list of numbers he was given to tattoo on the prisoners. It was 1943.

When Gita comes down with typhus, Lale knows it is a death sentence for her if the guards find out: either

the guards will shoot her or she will die from the cold. He offers a future favor to Baretzki who manages to get Gita transferred inside an office with heating. A friend of Gita's, Cilka, is has to pay dearly for her warm quarters. She is selected by the head of Birkenau to be his concubine, a sad occurrence, but one which will prove life-saving to Lale later.

**[page 100] He is an imposing man, rarely seen in the camp. He sits tapping his tall leather boot with his swagger stick. From an expressionless face, he stares at a space above Cilka's head. Cilka backs up against the door. Her hand goes to the door handle. In a flash, the swagger stick hurtles through the air and strikes Cilka's hand. She cries out in pain and slides down to the floor.**

**Schwarzhuber walks over to her and picks up his stick. He stands over her. His nostrils distend. He breathes heavily and glares at her. He takes off his hat and throws it across the room. With his other hand, he continues to hit his leg firmly with his swagger stick. With every whack Cilka flinches, expecting to be struck. He uses the stick to push up her shirt. Realizing what is expected, with shaking hands Cilka undoes the top two buttons of her shirt. Schwarzhuber then places his stick under her chin and forces her to rise to her feet. She is dwarfed by the man. His eyes seem to see nothing; this is a man whose soul has died and whose body is waiting to catch up with it.**

Resistance is futile; Cilka gives in to the inevitable and becomes his personal sex slave.

When Baretzki tells Lale about Dr. Josef Mengele, he says, "You should remember that name, Tätowierer." Anyone who has heard or read about Auschwitz will remember that name. He was known as "The Angel of Death" for the horrendous experiments he performed on human beings the camp. He was already well known to Lale.

**[page 111] That night, Lale tries to wash the dried blood from his shirt with water from a puddle. He partially succeeds, but then decides that a stain will be an appropriate reminder of the day he met Mengele. A doctor who will cause more pain than he eases, Lale suspects; whose very existence threatens in ways Lale doesn't want to contemplate. Yes, a stain must remain to remind Lale of the new danger that has entered his life. He must always be wary of this man whose soul is colder than his scalpel.**

Lale is confronted with pain and death on every side, from Mengele, the SS guards, and the pain he is forced to inflict on those he tattoos every day. The only relief came on one walk between the two camps of Birkenau and Auschwitz when he was outside in nature away from guards and prisoners. A flower, a single flower brings him joy when he encounters it during his walk one day.

**[page 112, 113] That evening Lale, greatly distressed, trudges alone, head down, back to Birkenau. Something just off the track catches his eye, a flash of color. A flower, a single flower, waving in the breeze. Bloodred petals around a jet-black middle. He looks for others, but there are none. Still, it is a flower, and he wonders again about the next time he will be able to give flowers to someone he cares for. Images of Gita and his mother come to him, the two women he loves the most, floating just out of reach. Grief comes in waves, threatening to drown him. *Will the two ever meet? Will the younger learn from the older? Will Mama welcome and love Gita as I do?***

He saves the precious flower, deciding to find a way to give it to his equally precious Gita, but the next morning the petals are curled up into the jet black center, reminding Lale that "*Death alone persists in this place.*" (Page 114)

My mother, Annette, loved looking for four-leaf clovers and she shared that love with me. Five-leaf clovers are even rarer, but following my mom's lead I learned to find dozens of four-leaf clovers, and even five-, six-, and seven-leaf clovers. It seemed to me that these rare clovers knew of Mom's love for them and showed up in one particular spot in her side yard in Mimosa Park. Every Spring day I could be

found searching for them in this one spot. What I couldn't control was my brother, the lawn cutter, who would mercilessly mow the clovers to the ground, in spite of my request to allow them to grow. They only survive during early cool days of Spring and look beautiful with their white flowers, but I had to hope for an uncut yard whenever I went to her house. My other brother, who shared my love of four-leaf clovers, pointed out that often you can find a second or even third such clover on the same plant, if you follow it to its root. One day I picked up 21 four-leafers, several five-leafers, and even a seven-leafer, but it was to no avail — nothing could stop the Butcher of Mimosa from laying them down in a pile of green bodies.

Four-leaf clovers were prized by the prisoners in the concentration camp because it was like a "Get out of Jail Free" in the parlor game Monopoly because they considered lucky by the SS guards of the camp.

[page 121]

**"What are you doing?"**

**"Looking for a four-leaf clover. You'd be surprised by how many there are here."**

**Lale smiles, charmed. "You're kidding."**

**"No, I've found several. Ivana finds them all the time. You look shocked."**

**"I am. You're the girl who doesn't believe she'll get out of here," yet you are looking for good-luck charms!"**

**"They're not for me. It's true I don't believe in such things."**

**"For who, then?"**

**"Do you know how superstitious the SS are? If we find a four-leaf clover, we treasure it. It's like currency for us."**

**"I don't understand."**

**"Whenever we are in danger from the SS, we hand it over. Sometimes it stops them from hitting us. If we take one to a meal, we might even get extra rations."**

Lale goes into his room and finds two SS guards with his precious bounty of gems and gold spread out on his bunk. He is doomed. And yet, Lale finds a way out.

"Are you sure you're not a cat?" Baretski asks Lale when he awakens back in his bunk, back at his job of Tätowierer. Baretsky told Lale at one point, "You are the only Jew to ever walk into an oven and walk out again."

That was Lale and Gita's life together, surviving one danger after another until the Russians showed up to liberate their camp. They are separated leaving the camp, but eventually get back together, get married, and move to Australia. In 2003 Lale tells his story to Heather Morris who writes this marvelous novel about life in the prison camps of Birkenau and Auschwitz, *a powerful story of love and survival*.

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