



# Book of the Month

*The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris

**Book Review by Libba Andrews, Friends of the Starkville Library Board Member**

*The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, a historical novel, written by Heather Morris first as a screenplay before she decided to debut it as her first book. Reviews concerning this book are mixed about her style of writing, but most agree the story is a good one and one that should have been written and shared.

Through the course of several years, Morris conducted a myriad of interviews with Lala Sokolov, owner of this story and a Holocaust survivor. One comment she makes in the acknowledgements encapsulates one of the underpinning threads of this novel. Morris writes, “Her death and Lala’s need to join her is what pushed him to tell his story. He wanted it recorded so in his words, ‘it would never happen again’.”

This unsettling story begins in April 1942, a time in history riddled with barbarianism and one of the greatest atrocities against humankind in all of history. But *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is about much more. It is about humanity and the power of love during the darkest of times. It is about survival and selflessness. It is a story of compassion and tenderness as well as evil and cruelty in a place designed to dehumanize and strip away all dignity.

The German government needs workers for their labor camps. They instruct all Jewish families to volunteer one young family member 18 years old or older to go and help “work”.

Lala Sokolov is a well-dressed, charming ladies’ man. He is also a Jew. He volunteers to go “work” so his brother does not have to leave his young family. What Lala does not know is that “work” will be in a concentration camp.

Lala and Gita meet while imprisoned at Auschwitz. He for myriad reasons, one being the Germans learn he speaks seven languages, becomes the concentration camp tattooist. Gita is one of thousands who Lala must tattoo the assigned number on her arm—her identity.

It was love at first sight for Lala. The moment he saw her he vowed quietly to himself that he and Gita would survive Auschwitz and they would marry and live happily ever after.

Being the camp tattooist afforded Lala luxuries other prisoners did not receive. The prison tattooist was considered a position of privilege coming with rewards such as extra rations, better sleeping conditions, and the ability to move more freely around the camp. This position also made it possible for Lala to secure fine chocolates, rubies, diamonds, and medicines; contraband that he received from murdered Jews within the camp.

Lala used these goods to bargain for extra rations and lifesaving favors for his fellow prisoners. He often said, “To save one is to save the world.”

Lala and Gita were two ordinary people caught up and living through a very dark time. They were deprived of their freedom and dignity and stripped of their identities. Their story is described as a triumph of the souls. They were pushed to the brink but never broke. Evil and cruelty surrounded them every second of every day, but they lived in faith, hope and love.

Many in command at Auschwitz likened Lala to a cat with nine lives. Even though he suffered considerable atrocities at their hands, he was determined to never give up. Lala had a deep and abiding compassion for others. His generosity and compassion saved many. Lala was a light in the darkness for so many.

Some have described Lala and Gita’s story as a story of the survival of resistance—daily difficulties and the need to make compromises personally and ethically just to survive. Their will to live and beat the Germans was one fire deep in their souls that kept them alive and helping others.

Years after surviving Auschwitz, the burden of guilt still haunted Lala. Was he looked upon as a Nazi collaborator? As the tattooist marking his fellow Jews, he was contributing to their demise. But his survival helped save others. “To save one is to save the world.”

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