



Cilka's Journey

By Heather Morris

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Genre & subject

Biographical fiction.

Auschwitz (Concentration camp) -- Fiction

Labor camps -- Fiction

Man-woman relationships -- Fiction

Synopsis

Cilka is just sixteen years old when she is taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp, in 1942. The Commandant at Birkenau, Schwarzhuber, notices her long beautiful hair, and forces her separation from the other women prisoners. Cilka learns quickly that power, even unwillingly given, equals survival.

After liberation, Cilka is charged as a collaborator for sleeping with the enemy and sent to Siberia. But what choice did she have? And where did the lines of morality lie for Cilka, who was sent to Auschwitz when still a child?

In a Siberian prison camp, Cilka faces challenges both new and horribly familiar, including the unwanted attention of the guards. But when she makes an impression on a woman doctor, Cilka is taken under her wing. Cilka begins to tend to the ill in the camp, struggling to care for them under brutal conditions.

Cilka finds endless resources within herself as she daily confronts death and faces terror. And when she nurses a man called Ivan, Cilka finds that despite everything that has happened to her, there is room in her heart for love.

Author biography

Heather Morris is a native of New Zealand, now resident in Australia. For several years, while working in a large public hospital in Melbourne, she studied and wrote screenplays, one of which was optioned by an Academy Award-winning screenwriter in the US. In 2003, Heather was introduced to an elderly gentleman who 'might just have a story worth telling'. Their friendship grew and Lale embarked on a journey of self-scrutiny, entrusting the innermost details of his life during the Holocaust to her. Heather originally wrote Lale's story as a screenplay – which ranked high in international competitions – before reshaping it into her debut novel, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*.

Discussion starters

1. After reading the author's note about her conversation with Lale Sokolov, the *Tattooist of Auschwitz*, did knowing that Cilka's story is based on a real person change your reading experience? Does the author weave fact and realistic fiction into the story effectively? In what ways?

2. What drew you to this time period and novel? What can humanity still learn from this historical space—from the front lines of an infamous concentration camp to the brutal Russian Gulags?
3. “What you are doing, Cilka, is the only form of resistance you have— staying alive. You are the bravest person I have ever known, I hope you know that.” (Chapter 32) Is Lale right? Is Cilka brave, and were her acts of resistance the best course of action she had? What does Cilka feel guilty about or complicit in? How is she suffering because of it?
4. “Another number. Cilka subconsciously rubs her left arm; hidden under her clothing is her identity from that other place. How many times can one person be reduced, erased?” (Chapter 3) How would you answer Cilka here? What inner fire allows Cilka to live? How does she endure with so much death and suffering around her?
5. Does Cilka assume a protective role for the women in her hut? For her block at the camp? In what ways is Cilka a target for their rage and a focus for their hopes for life beyond the fencing? How does she help the women survive the toughest parts of their sentences (the rapes, work, injuries, separation)?
6. Why do the women invest their time and scarce energies into “beautifying” the hut with their meager resources? What does this tell us about the human spirit?
7. In what ways is Cilka’s time served in the maternity ward a turning point? How does she intervene with her patients and make a difference? How does she put herself at risk?
8. How does Cilka find her calling with her ambulance work? How did she spur others to be their best selves?
9. Why does Cilka ultimately tell her hut-mates about her experiences and actions at Auschwitz? How does she know the time is right?
10. Why are women’s voices of wartime so important to unearth and tell?
11. What could be lost when they are unreported or underreported?

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