

Tattooist distorting reality, say Auschwitz custodians

EXCLUSIVE

FIONA HARARI

The administrators of Auschwitz have warned historical errors in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* are distorting wider understanding about Nazi Germany's biggest concentration camp, saying the best-selling book is "almost without any value as a document".

Pawel Sawicki, press officer at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, said that while there was no issue with fictionalising the Holocaust in general, "in this case there are too many inaccuracies that in a way distorted the image of Auschwitz as it was".

"Its mixture of the true story of a person and all those mistakes that are around it are problematic because I believe most of those inaccuracies could have been avoided," Mr Sawicki said.

The Tattooist of Auschwitz, by Australia-based author Heather Morris, tells of the love story between Lali Sokolov, the camp's tattooist, and his future wife Gita, whom he met him when she was also imprisoned there. The couple, who have both died, spent their post-war decades in Melbourne.

The book, whose opening scene sees Lali (spelled Lale in the Australian edition) eyeing Gita for the first time when he is forced to re-tattoo a five-digit number on her arm, was Australia's top fiction title for the first nine months of this year and has reached No 1 on *The New York Times* paperback fiction bestseller list. Hundreds of thousands of copies have been sold and the book has been widely translated. Plans for a miniseries have been announced and even a musical has been mooted.

While the book is promoted on its Australian cover as being "based on an incredible true story", Morris said in February: "Ninety-five per cent of it is as it happened, researched and confirmed. What has been fictionalised is where I've put Lale and Gita into events where really they weren't. They weren't together when the American planes flew over the camps, for example."

Morris also thanked two people in the book "for their brilliant investigative skills in researching 'facts' to ensure history and memory waltzed perfectly in step".

Now, one of Australia's leading Holocaust historians has revealed he refused to endorse the book because he was alarmed at its historical blunders. Konrad Kwiet,



Lali and Gita Sokolov with their son Gary

chief historian to Australia's War Crimes Commission, was sent a copy of the manuscript last year, before it was published. "From the beginning I was very sceptical," said Professor Kwiet, resident historian at the Sydney Jewish Museum. He added that as an historian he was not able to appraise fiction. "It's a sex story of Auschwitz that has very little historical accuracy," he said.

Bram Presser, whose novel about his grandfather's Holocaust experiences, *The Book of Dirt*, won the Christina Stead prize for fiction at this year's NSW Premier's Literary awards, said: "I think that the story is extraordinary but I have deep reservations about the telling of it. That people should believe that this is a true representation of the Holocaust is problematic. 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."

Morris, who interviewed Sokolov over several years, said yesterday: "I have written a story of the Holocaust, not the story of the Holocaust. I have written Lale's story." Asked her reaction to the extent of the fact-checking, she said: "I am surprised it has taken so long." She refused to comment on errors highlighted in the report.

Previously she has said: "It's not a memoir. It's fiction."

That has failed to prevent criticism from officials at Auschwitz. "I think that it's an excuse, it's a very comfortable shield," Mr Sawicki said. "You can always say, 'But I am writing fiction' but the people of this story deserved better."

"Telling the story of a survivor, if it's based in the real world it should try to get the reality of that world right. We have already had visitors coming here to the mem-

orial and they ask questions about *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and they thought they were reading the true story, historically accurate. For us this becomes an issue."

On Saturday, the Auschwitz Memorial tweeted: "Due to the number of factual errors *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* cannot be recommended as a valuable position for those who wish to understand the history of the camp. The book is an impression about Auschwitz inspired by authentic events, almost without any value as a document."

Given the book's popularity, authorities at Auschwitz have also published the results of an extensive fact-check, worried "that this

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HISTORIAN

title will become for many readers a source of knowledge and imaginations about the reality of life in KL Auschwitz". In the latest issue of its online Memoria magazine, Wanda Witek-Malicka of the Auschwitz Memorial Research Centre writes "the reading of the novel verifies the assurance of its factual and documentary character". Yet there are "numerous errors and information inconsistent with the facts".

The inaccuracies include incorrect information about the cattle train that took Sokolov to Auschwitz from Slovakia in April 1942. "Here she (Morris) probably used the modern online searching engine of railway connections ... This error otherwise cannot be explained," the report says.

A description of prisoners at



Author Heather Morris

Auschwitz being gassed in a converted bus "does not find confirmation in any sources", although movable gas chambers were used elsewhere, while Sokolov could not have obtained penicillin in January 1943 as the drug's production was still being researched.

Other inaccuracies include an irregular map of Birkenau in the appendix and the inclusion of a long, semi-explicit sexual relationship between a high-ranking SS member and a female prisoner.

"In practice, the possibility ... was non-existent," the report says.

"The reality of the war ... has been fictionalised and poetised in the book. The Birkenau camp is also presented as a place where prisoners move about almost freely ... The fact that particular sections of the camp were separated with barbed wire, and moving between them is strictly prohibited ... is not reflected."

The article also looks at the date Gita is said to have been taken to Auschwitz and the number tattooed on her arm, and concludes "she was either brought to the camp on a different date or received a different number than that indicated in the book".

The book opens with a description of Sokolov tattooing the numbers 34902 on his future wife. Some editions, including the Australian cover, show two tattooed arms joined at the hands; one carries Sokolov's number and the other is tattooed with 34902. Gita's number is repeated in a chapter headed "additional information", which also states she was transported to the camp on April 13, 1942. But Gita Sokolov testified in 1997 that her number was 4562.

An investigation by *The Australian* has revealed further irregularities. According to the *Auschwitz Chronicle*, the highly regarded tome recording daily events at the camp from 1939 to

1945, the female number 4562 was tattooed on April 3, 1942 — 10 days earlier than stated in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. The five-digit number ascribed to Gita was given to a Dutch woman in 1943. Of 1184 men, women and children transported from Westerbork that day, she was one of just 179 not sent to the gas chamber.

In her recorded testimony with the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation, Gita Sokolov stated her number was 4562. "And you know who made it? My husband," she said.

Later, however, when talking about life at Birkenau, she said of her husband: "I already knew him, but not when he made my number, later. Somehow he was coming to a block and I was on that block."

When she talked about having been moved from Auschwitz to Birkenau in July 1942, she did not mention being re-tattooed.

In his Shoah Foundation testimony, recorded in December 1996, Lali Sokolov said of Gita: "I saw her once marching and she saw me. Somehow we started ... One day I came in the (women's barracks) and I met her in the block. Since then I started to send her letters."

Later in the interview, having mentioned he had had letters passed on to her, he was asked when he had met his wife. "I was not married (then). In 1945 ... Do you want to jump (ahead)?" and another question was asked instead. He said nothing then about having tattooed her.

At another point, he was asked if he talked to the prisoners he tattooed, and he replied yes. "I remember only one. Look, it was a job, it had to be done. I remember only one guy." And he went on to describe a large man called Yacob.

In a separate testimony recorded by Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust Centre in May 1996, Sokolov did not mention tattooing Gita. He again talked about having seen her as she was made to march with some other women in Birkenau. "Very good looking girls; there I saw once marching the girls down (sic) — I saw my wife. I didn't know her; I wasn't married. But she was very beautiful."

The book also includes a passage about Lali and Gita throwing handfuls of grass at one another, even though it is widely accepted that there was no grass in what has been described as a "landscape of death".

Fiona Harari is the author of We Are Here: talking with Australia's oldest Holocaust survivors