

The Tattooist of Auschwitz



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HEATHER MORRIS

Heather Morris was born in Te Awamutu, New Zealand. She grew up mainly in the village of Pirongia, where she lived with her parents and four siblings. As a child, Morris took an interest in storytelling, though her grades were average and she didn't particularly gravitate toward writing down her ideas. Then, as a young woman in 1971, she moved to Melbourne, Australia, where she met her husband. They couple had two sons and a daughter. After returning to New Zealand to raise their children, the couple moved back to Melbourne in 1987, and in 1991 Morris decided to pursue higher education, feeling as if she had missed out by not attending university earlier in her life. With this in mind, she majored in political science at Monash University and then she went on to work as a social worker between 1995 and 2017. During this time, Morris also studied scriptwriting, which is why she originally tried to develop *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* into a screenplay when she was introduced to the real-life Lale Sokolov in 2003. Over the next three years, Morris became friends with Lale and she visited him often, listening to his story and gathering the information necessary to tell it to a wider audience. After Morris wrote the tale as a screenplay but she was unable to find anyone to make it into a movie, she decided to turn it into a novel instead. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* has now sold over one million copies and it is a *New York Times* bestseller.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Tattooist of Auschwitz is based on the life of Lale Sokolov and his experience in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp located in Birkenau, Poland. Lale entered Birkenau as a prisoner in 1942 and he worked as the camp's tattooist, staying there until two days before the Russian Red Army descended upon Auschwitz-Birkenau in January of 1945 and the troops liberated the remaining prisoners. At this point, Lale was moved by the Nazis to a concentration camp in Mauthausen-Gusen in Austria. When he eventually escaped the Nazis, he returned to his native Slovakia (which had been turned into Czechoslovakia at that point by the Soviet Union), where he searched for Gita and he soon found her. By October 1945, the couple got married and they set up a home in Bratislava, where they opened a factory that produced various fabrics. In the coming years, Lale and Gita worked quietly to support the creation of a Jewish state in Israel, sending money and valuables out of the country to strengthen the cause. When the Soviet Union discovered this, though, Lale was imprisoned. Thankfully, he was released shortly thereafter, at which point he and Gita fled

Europe for Australia. In Melbourne, Gita gave birth to the couple's only son, Gary Sokolov, and Lale once more opened a fabric and clothing business. For decades, Lale remained quiet about his time in the concentration camps because he feared that people would accuse him of being a Nazi collaborator, since he worked as the tattooist. When Gita died in 2003, though, he decided to tell his story, entrusting Heather Morris to make sure it reached a wide audience. Lale died in 2006, 12 years before *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* was published.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Tattooist of Auschwitz exists within a long and wide-ranging tradition of literature about the Holocaust. This includes famous titles like Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Like all of these works, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is based on real events and people who actually experienced the Holocaust. However, whereas *Night* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* are autobiographical, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is more like *Schindler's List* or *Maus*, in that these books were written *about* real people but not *by* those people. On another note, like many Holocaust books, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* concerns itself with the act of survival. For this reason, it is also worth considering Primo Levi's memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, which—needless to say—also examines human resilience and what it takes to endure hardship. Furthermore, the way Heather Morris approaches morality in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* brings to mind Hannah Arendt's book of journalistic nonfiction, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. In this report, Arendt details the criminal trial of the infamous Nazi Adolf Eichmann, who claimed he was innocent because he was simply following orders and doing his job—a sentiment that aligns with Morris's examination of the SS officers stationed at Auschwitz-Birkenau and their lack of remorse.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Tattooist of Auschwitz
- **When Published:** January 11, 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction; Biographical Fiction
- **Setting:** Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazi concentration camp in Poland
- **Climax:** In the middle of the night, Lale hears chaos stirring beyond the walls of his block and he rushes out to discover that Gita and the other female prisoners have been rounded up by the Nazis and that they're being marched out of the concentration camp.

- **Antagonist:** The Nazi Regime
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Consistently Inconsistent. Although Gita's identification number in real life was 4562, Morris recorded it as 34902 in the first edition of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. When this discrepancy was brought to Morris's attention, she claimed that Lale Sokolov told her that the number was indeed 34902, though there are no records to support this. In the 2018 Harper paperback edition of the novel, the number 34902 seems to have been replaced by 4562 in all but three instances, creating yet another inconsistency—this time within the very pages of the book itself.

Love in the Time of Penicillin. Many detractors have pointed out that although Lale obtains penicillin for Gita in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, penicillin wasn't actually available until after World War II. However, Morris claims in the "Additional Information" section at the back of the novel that the medicine Lale gave Gita was "prontocil," a "precursor to penicillin" that was discovered in 1932.



PLOT SUMMARY

It is April, 1942, and 25-year-old Lale is riding through Europe in a train, cramped in a cattle car with other Jewish men. Nobody knows where they're going. Lale's family is from Krompachy, Slovakia, and when he heard that the Nazis were forcing Jewish families to give the government a child older than 18, he offered himself up. The Germans claimed they would put him to work, but when he reported for duty, he didn't know what he'd be doing, which is why he's now dressed in a suit, wanting to look good regardless of what his job will be. But after days on the train without food, he can tell his new job won't require a suit.

When the train arrives at its destination, SS officers force the passengers out and yell orders. Lale follows instructions as Nazis use the butts of their rifles to hit anyone who doesn't obey them. He's then led with the others into a building, where they line up and wait for identification numbers to be tattooed on their arms. During this process, he learns that he has arrived at Auschwitz, where he'll be put to work. Upon receiving their tattoos, the prisoners are told to strip naked and enter a large shower. Afterwards, they find that their clothes have been replaced by striped prisoner garb, which Lale puts on before the Nazis shave his head. He's then escorted to a nearby location called Birkenau, which is several miles from Auschwitz's main area. He is assigned to Block 7, a building full of bunks, each of which is occupied by two to four prisoners. Lale and a man he met on the train named Aron share a bunk

with two others and spend the night waiting for morning, when they'll finally receive food. In the middle of the night, Lale goes outside to pee, relieved to see there's a ditch for prisoners to relieve themselves. As he approaches, he notices three prisoners sitting over this ditch and quietly conversing, but before he gets too close, he sees two SS officers coming near. Without warning, they shoot the three prisoners before casually moving on. Devastated, Lale vows to himself that he'll survive Auschwitz no matter what.

The following morning, the prisoners receive cups of weak soup. As they force it down, Lale jokes about the taste with Aron, cementing their friendship. They then meet their kapo, who explains that he's their boss. The kapo assigns Lale to work on the roof of a half-built building, so he climbs a ladder and finds two Russians. Thankfully, Lale speaks multiple languages, so he's able to communicate with these men, who tell him the best way to go about his new job. They also tell him important information about life in Auschwitz, explaining the power structures at play in the camp.

After witnessing another terrible murder one day, Lale faints, and it later turns out he has contracted typhus. When he wakes, he discovers he's been unconscious for days. An old man who introduces himself as Pepan attends to him and helps him outside to get fresh air. Pepan is the *Tätowierer*, the prisoner who tattoos the new arrivals. He explains that a group of prisoners in Block 7 have been caring for Lale at night, and Pepan himself has been looking after him during the day. Pepan was walking by Block 7 when Lale's body was placed on "a cart for the dead and dying," and he watched as Aron begged the officer pulling the cart to leave Lale. The officer refused, but Aron dragged Lale off the cart when the officer wasn't looking—an act that intrigued Pepan. This, he says, is why he himself decided to help Lale, thinking he must be a wonderful person if somebody was willing to risk saving him. He then offers Lale a job as his assistant, saying he could help him tattoo the prisoners. Lale hesitates at first, disliking the idea of scarring unwilling people, but Pepan says that somebody else will do it if he doesn't. Moreover, whoever takes the job probably won't be as empathetic as Lale. Thinking this over, Lale agrees to work as Pepan's assistant.

When Lale returns to Block 7, he learns from his bunkmates that Aron was killed by the kapo for trying to protect him. Mortified, he listens as they tell him that they decided to continue helping him because Aron inspired them with his idea that "to save one is to save the world." Weeping, Lale thanks them and hopes he can someday repay them, though he knows he most likely will never be able to.

Lale works with Pepan, meeting the SS officers who oversee their work. One day, he and Pepan are instructed to re-ink the tattoos of a group of female prisoners whose numbers have faded. Lale tells Pepan he can't do this, since he has always respected women, but Pepan insists he has no choice.

Accordingly, Lale goes about his job. While working on one of the prisoner's tattoos, he notices that a man wearing a white coat is walking down the line and inspecting the women. The man soon reaches the woman Lale is tattooing and holds her face. Sensing that the woman is about to say something, Lale squeezes her arm and indicates that she should remain quiet. She heeds his advice, and after a moment, the man in white moves on. "Well done," Lale whispers, committing her number to memory, looking into her eyes, and feeling his heart skip.

Not long after this encounter, Pepan disappears. Oberscharführer Houstek—Lale's boss, and one of the highest ranking officers at Auschwitz—announces that Lale is now the *Tätowierer*. Unable to discern what has happened to his mentor, Lale accepts this as best he can and asks for an assistant to help him. Consequently, Baretski, the officer assigned to supervise Lale, grabs a man named Leon and forces him to be the assistant tattooist. That night, Lale learns that he now has his own room in a different block and will receive extra rations of food, so he starts smuggling out his extra portions and bringing them to his fellow prisoners. He also approaches a group of workers dressed in civilian clothes and strikes up a conversation with two of them, who explain that they're not prisoners, but local workers who go home each night. The men are named Victor and Yuri, and they give Lale some sausage, which he cuts up and shares with a number of other prisoners. Victor and Yuri also agree to bring Lale other goods, but Lale tells them not to give him anything more until he finds a way to pay them.

During this time, Lale tries to connect with the woman who made his heart skip. Remembering her number, he asks Baretski—with whom he has become somewhat friendly—to give her a note. Baretski never misses an opportunity to remind Lale that he can kill him whenever he wants, but he agrees to deliver the note. The woman then writes back, saying that her name is Gita. Passing notes like this, they arrange to meet on Sundays when the prisoners are allowed to mill about the grounds, and though Gita is shy during their first encounter, it's clear they both have feelings for one another. It is also during this period that Lale makes an arrangement with two women whose job it is to go through the prisoners' former possessions looking for valuables. Lale gives these women pieces of sausage from Victor and Yuri, and they agree to bring him jewels and money. So begins his system of bartering, as he gives Victor and Yuri precious stones and money in exchange for chocolate, sausage, and other food items, which he spreads throughout the camp, making sure to give plenty to Gita and her friends.

At one point, Gita becomes life-threateningly ill with typhus. Distracted, Lale pays Victor and Yuri to obtain medicine, which he gives to Gita's friends Dana and Ivana, who administer it to her. As he waits to see if Gita will recover, Lale realizes just how much he cares about her, despite the fact that he hardly knows her—after all, she won't even tell him her last name, not

wanting to share this information until they leave Auschwitz. To that end, Lale insists to her when she recovers that they will one day start a family and live free, kissing and making love whenever they want. And though Gita is hesitant to adopt his optimism, she comes around to this worldview.

At work one day, Lale tattoos an enormous man named Jakub, who whispers that he's extremely hungry. With such a large frame, Jakub needs more food than the average person, so Lale tells him to hide nearby instead of following everyone to his block. At the end of the day, Lale takes Jakub back to his private room, gives him food, and walks him to where he's supposed to be, knowing he has possibly saved this man's life, since Jakub could have starved if he'd been forced to wait until the next day to eat.

By this point, Lale and Gita have cemented their relationship. They're even able to start having sex because Lale bribes Gita's kapo into letting them spend alone time in her block—an experience that makes Lale feel stronger and more determined to survive. However, it's during this period that he enters his room to discover that two Nazis have found his stash of jewels and money, which he keeps under his mattress. The officers take him to one of the camp's punishment blocks, where prisoners are tortured and often executed. Thrown into a cell, he waits until the door opens again, at which point he's surprised to see Jakub. Jakub enters and explains that, because of his size, the Nazis made him the camp's torturer. It's his job, he says, to get Lale to confess the names of the prisoners who helped him smuggle in contraband. However, Jakub tells him, when the Nazis enter and watch the beating, Lale shouldn't give up the names. Jakub will try to go easy on him, but he says he's prepared to "kill one Jew to save ten others." When the time comes, he beats and whips Lale but makes the punishment look worse than it actually is, eventually turning to the observing officers and saying he's certain Lale must not know the names of the people who helped him. To Lale's great surprise, this leads to his release, and he's returned to his previous posting as the tattooist.

When rumors circulate that the Russian army advancing, the SS officers start acting nervous, quickly destroying the camp's documents. In the commotion, Gita and many other female prisoners are rushed through the gates during a snowstorm. Just before she's swept away, she yells to Lale that her last name is Furman. Shortly thereafter, Lale is put on a bus as Nazis shoot prisoners at random and the camp descends into mayhem. He's then taken to a new concentration camp in Mauthausen, Austria, where he wins over a guard by impressing him with his fluent German. This guard offers to transfer him to a safer camp in Vienna, and Lale accepts. Meanwhile, Gita manages to escape with three Polish women by running across a snowy field in a moment of confusion. Seeking help from people living in a nearby cottage, they successfully avoid Nazi scrutiny and get help from Russian

soldiers, who drive them to Krakow, where they stay with one of the Polish women's sister. From there, Gita travels with a truck driver to Bratislava because she—like Lale—is from Slovakia.

At the concentration camp in Vienna, Lale hides that he's Jewish because the camp is intended for non-Jewish prisoners. Since the director of this camp is very old, Lale finds it easy to stay out of trouble. In fact, he's able to escape through a hole in one of the fences, slipping out without looking back. Dashing into the woods, he comes upon a group of Russian soldiers, who take him as a prisoner. Because he can speak so many languages, they bring him to the chalet they've turned into their headquarters and tell him that he will work as a liaison between the soldiers and the women in town, informing him that he'll be given food, shelter, and fine clothes in exchange for bribing the local women into coming to the chalet for parties. In this capacity, Lale offers women jewels and money to spend the night with the soldiers. Because he's so charming, he's quite good at this job, and the Russians soon trust him enough to let him drive into town on his own. Seizing this opportunity to escape, he makes his way into town, parks the car, steals a bike, and sets off. After a grueling journey, he finally reaches his home to discover that his sister is still alive, though his older brother has died and nobody knows what has become of his parents. Determined to find Gita, he goes to Bratislava after hearing that many Slovaks have been filtering into the cities from the concentration camps. Each day for two weeks, he waits at the train station in the hopes of spotting Gita, but he doesn't see her. While making his way through the street one day, though, he spots her. Lale falls to his knees, so Gita kneels too and says that she loves him, at which point he asks if she'll marry him. "Yes," she replies, "I will."

Lale becomes the tattooist himself, he uses his power to help others. His position allows him to curry favor with an SS officer named Baretzki. It also enables him to walk around unharmed by other Nazis. With these privileges, he develops a relationship with a female prisoner named Gita, with whom he falls madly in love. Insisting that they'll both survive, he plans his future with Gita while smuggling food into the camp and distributing it to his friends and people in need. Overall, Lale's defining quality is his willingness to put himself in danger for other people, valuing unity and communal support over all else. When he finally finds freedom, he returns home only to set back out again to reunite with Gita. Upon finding her in Bratislava, he drops to his knees and asks her to marry him—a proposal she accepts.

Gita – Gita is a young woman from Slovakia whom Lale meets in the concentration camp at Birkenau. The first time Lale is ordered to tattoo female prisoners, he works on re-inking Gita's identification number while Herr Doktor Josef Mengele—whom he doesn't yet know—walks down the line of prisoners. Taking Gita's face in his hands, Mengele inspects her. Just as she's about to say something, Lale squeezes her arm and furtively indicates that she should keep quiet. She follows this advice, and Mengele walks away. From this point on, Lale can't stop thinking about Gita and the captivating way she looked into his eyes. Shy at first, Gita responds to Lale's initial attempts to communicate with her, passing short notes to him via Baretzki. Before long, she starts meeting him behind an administration building, though she refuses to tell him her last name or anything about her background, finding it hard to believe that their relationship will ever transcend the horrors of their current circumstances. Nonetheless, she gradually comes to accept Lale's optimistic belief that they will survive the concentration camps and get married. When she contracts typhus, her friends Dana and Ivana hide her from the guards while Lale frantically tries to obtain medication from Victor and Yuri, his sources who help him smuggle contraband into the camp. In this way, Dana, and Ivana successfully keep Gita alive, at which point Lale asks Baretzki for a favor and has her transferred to a position in the administration building where it's always warm. Later, when the Nazis start emptying the camps ahead of the Russian army's attack, Gita is swept away from Lale and forced to endure a long trek through the snow. Dana dies on this journey, but Gita escapes with four Polish girls, eventually making her way to Bratislava, where she and Lale reunite and get married.

Baretzki – Baretzki is the Nazi officer assigned to guard Lale. In this capacity, he tells Lale that he will severely punish him if he ever does anything that will reflect poorly on Baretzki himself, since Baretzki doesn't want to get in trouble with his boss, Oberscharführer Houstek. At the same time, Baretzki also periodically gives Lale advice about how to stay safe, noting that Lale's new position as the tattooist will generally protect



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lale – Lale is a young man from Slovakia, and the protagonist of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. Kind and affable, he is a romantic who has always dreamed of finding his soulmate. As a prisoner in Birkenau, he eventually becomes the camp's tattooist. He finds his way into this job after Pepan—his predecessor—sees Lale's friend Aron risk his own life to save him from the Nazis, pulling Lale off of a death cart and devoting himself to curing him of typhus. A week later, Lale wakes to discover that Aron was killed for protecting him, at which point Pepan started nursing him back to health. Impressed by Lale's strong character and his fluency in multiple languages, Pepan makes him the assistant tattooist. Lale is hesitant to accept this position because he abhors the idea of tattooing unwilling prisoners, but Pepan convinces him that taking the job will make it easier for him to survive, which is something Lale has made a personal vow to do. When Pepan later disappears and

him from random acts of violence, though he adds that he has the power to kill Lale whenever he wants. Still, Baretski is just a young man who lacks much in the way of education, and he takes a liking to Lale, often confiding in him. To that end, he talks about his personal life, asking Lale for advice about his relationship with his girlfriend. When he learns that Lale has feelings for Gita, he offers to pass notes between the two prisoners, thereby helping them establish a relationship. Furthermore, he agrees to do Lale a favor in the aftermath of Gita's severe illness, pulling strings to have her transferred to a job in the administration building so she can keep warm. In this way, Baretski demonstrates that he is capable of kindness, though he also frequently proves his profound lack of empathy by randomly killing prisoners or laughing at even the most troubling sights. Because of this, Lale hopes that Baretski won't survive his post at Auschwitz-Birkenau, certain the man will burn in hell even if he sometimes exhibits flashes of kindness.

Jakub – Jakub is an American Jewish man who is imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau while visiting family in Poland. An extremely large and strong man, he quietly tells Lale that he's starving while Lale tattoos his identification number onto his forearm. Feeling sorry for Jakub because he knows that such a large man needs a lot of food, Lale tells him to wait in the shadows until the end of the day, at which point Lale takes him back to his private room and gives him his hidden rations of food. Shortly thereafter, Houstek takes Jakub away from the rest of the prisoners in Birkenau, and nobody knows what is to become of him. Lale later learns that Jakub has been put to work as the camp's torturer in Block 11, where the Nazis force him to beat and kill prisoners. Lale discovers this because he himself is taken to Block 11 when the Nazis discover that he's been smuggling food into the camp. Surprised to see him, Jakub explains that he will have to torture him in front of several officers, who want Lale to give up the names of the prisoners who helped him with his smuggling operation. And yet, Jakub says that Lale must not—under any circumstances—give up the names. Going on, he explains that he'll try to make Lale's beating look worse than it really is, but that he's prepared to kill Lale if it means protecting the other prisoners, since he would rather “kill one Jew to save ten others.” Lale respects this mindset and agrees not to reveal the names of the other prisoners. During the beating, Jakub thoroughly injures Lale but manages to spare his life, telling the guards that it's obvious Lale doesn't know the names of the other prisoners, thereby returning the kindness Lale showed him on his first night in the camp.

Cilka – Cilka is an extraordinarily beautiful young woman who works with Gita in the Birkenau administration building. Unlike the other prisoners, Cilka has for some reason been allowed to avoid having her head shaved. Unfortunately, though, it is perhaps because she stands out as one of the only prisoners with long hair that the top commandant at Birkenau,

Schwarzhuber, takes notice of her and forces her to become an unwilling mistress, raping her on a regular basis. When Lale manages to survive being tortured in Block 11 and is moved to Block 31 (where prisoners are sent to labor until they die), he asks Baretski to relay a message to Gita, instructing him to make sure that Gita tells Cilka about where he is. At first, Cilka doesn't understand why Lale would go out of his way to communicate this information to her, but she soon realizes that she can help him by asking for a favor from Schwarzhuber. Lying in bed one night, she points out that she has never asked for anything from the commandant, and when he agrees that this is true, she asks him to have Lale transferred out of Block 31. In the end, then, Cilka is the reason Lale is able to avoid death in Block 31 and return to his position as the tattooist.

Pepan – Pepan is the tattooist at Auschwitz-Birkenau before Lale. One day, he sees Aron pleading with an officer, begging him to take Lale off of a cart of sick and dying prisoners. When the officer turns his back, Aron drags Lale away. From this point on, Pepan starts helping nurse Lale back to health, figuring that he must be an extraordinary person, since Aron was willing to risk his life to save him. When Lale comes back to consciousness a week later, Pepan introduces himself, explaining that he's a French economist who was taken by the Nazis for speaking out against their policies. He also explains that he's the tattooist and that he needs an assistant, and when Lale voices his hesitation to accept the job, he notes that somebody will fill the position if he doesn't. What's more, Pepan says that the person who takes the job might not have as much compassion as Lale—an argument that convinces him. In the coming weeks, Pepan teaches Lale not only how to tattoo prisoners, but how to deal with the guards, urging him to adopt an attitude of subservience if he wants to survive. Shortly thereafter, Pepan disappears, and Lale is appointed as the camp's tattooist. Despite his best efforts, Lale never learns what happened to Pepan.

Aron – Aron is a young man Lale meets in the cattle car on the way to Auschwitz-Birkenau. A kind and curious person, Aron looks to Lale for comfort and advice, asking questions about what Lale thinks will happen to them. Upon arriving at the camp, Aron and Lale become bunkmates, and they cheer each other up by joking about their circumstances and generally remaining positive. When Lale contracts typhus, Aron is the one who pulls him off of the Nazi's cart of dead and dying prisoners—an act of heroism that Pepan witnesses. In turn, Pepan decides to take Lale on as an assistant, assuming he must be a remarkable person because of the risk Aron took to save his life. Unfortunately, though, Aron ends up dying because of this selfless act. When a kapo comes looking for Lale, Aron tells him that he's already been taken away. This upsets the kapo so much that he decides to punish Aron, taking him away from his fellow prisoners, who never see him again. In the aftermath of this event, Aron's other bunkmates decide to help finish what

Aron started, nursing Lale back to health because they were inspired by Aron's commitment to the idea that "to save one is to save the world."

Victor – Victor is a Polish man who lives near the concentration camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau with his wife and son, Yuri. Together with Yuri, he comes to Birkenau during the days to work as a paid laborer, helping to construct the multiple crematoriums. It is while doing this that he meets Lale and starts giving him extra food, slipping rations into Lale's supplies bag. A compassionate man who wants to help in whatever small way he can, he insists that Lale need not compensate him for the food, but Lale starts bringing him jewels and money that other prisoners find while going through the valuables confiscated from new arrivals by the Nazis. In this way, Lale establishes a working relationship with Victor and Yuri, bringing them valuables in exchange for sausage, chocolate, and even medication when necessary.

Yuri – Yuri is Victor's son, a Polish worker who comes to Birkenau by day to help construct the camp's crematoriums. Unlike his father, Yuri is hesitant to show kindness to Lale, whom he calls a "Jew boy." However, Victor chastises him for being rude, so he starts treating Lale with more respect, going along with his father's decision to bring Lale food in exchange for jewels and money.

Leon – Leon is the assistant tattooist, working alongside Lale to ink identification numbers onto the forearms of incoming prisoners. A quiet and sensitive man, Leon is eventually taken away by Josef Mengele, who castrates him. Upon returning to his work, Leon is demoralized and frightened, and Lale does whatever he can to help his friend recover. Shortly before the camps are liberated, Baretzki informs Lale that Leon is "gone," and Lale receives no further information about the matter.

Herr Doktor Josef Mengele – Josef Mengele is the doctor at Auschwitz-Birkenau. A twisted and deeply unsettling man, Mengele selects prisoners upon whom he carries out medical experiments. Lale fears Mengele more than anyone else in the camps, especially because Mengele emotionally torments him by suggesting that he will someday take him away. Instead of doing this, though, Mengele takes Leon as one of his subjects and castrates him before letting him rejoin Lale. Like the rest of the characters in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, Mengele was a real person. He is now known for the sickening procedures and experiments he carried out on prisoners, particularly on child twins.

Schwarzhuber – Schwarzhuber is a high-ranking officer at Birkenau. A cruel and unfeeling man, he rapes Cilka and forces her to become his unwilling mistress, calling upon her frequently and taking her to his bedroom. When Cilka learns that Lale has been taken to Block 31 (where it's extremely difficult to survive), she asks Schwarzhuber to do her a favor by having him transferred and reinstated as the tattooist, pointing

out that she has never refused to do anything he wants to do. Somewhat unexpectedly, Schwarzhuber agrees to do this, thereby saving Lale's life.

Oberscharführer Houstek – Houstek is the Oberscharführer (a senior-ranking Nazi officer) at Auschwitz-Birkenau. A terse and severe man, he approves of Pepan's decision to appoint Lale as the assistant tattooist because he's impressed by the fact that Lale can speak so many languages. Later, he becomes infuriated when Lale not only survives torture and escapes execution after getting caught smuggling food, but also regains his position as the tattooist, though he doesn't interfere with this turn of events because Schwarzhuber—who outranks him—is the one who made the decision.

Dana – Dana is Gita's closest friend in Birkenau. A devoted companion, she works hard to keep Gita alive when Gita contracts typhus, working alongside Ivana and Lale to nurse her friend back to full health. She also encourages Gita's relationship with Lale, saying that she's glad at least somebody in the camp has managed to find some kind of happiness. When the Nazis assemble the female prisoners and rush them out of the camp at the end of the war, Dana dies during a long journey through the snow. Falling to the ground, she forces Gita to leave her behind, knowing that her friend will die too if she continues helping her.

Ivana – Along with Dana and Cilka, Ivana is one of Gita's close friends in the camp. When the Nazis round up the female prisoners and force them out of Birkenau at the end of the war, Gita and Dana are unable to find Ivana, unsure whether or not she's still alive.

Nadya – Nadya is a woman who belongs to the group of Romany people who move into Lale's block. At first, Lale is hesitant to embrace his new neighbors, but he soon grows fond of them and develops a close relationship with Nadya, who reminds him of his mother. This makes a certain amount of sense, since Nadya was once a mother herself, though her family died before she was taken to Birkenau. When the Nazis collect the Romany people in the middle of the night and force them out of the camp, Lale is particularly devastated to see Nadya go.

Mrs. Goldstein – Mrs. Goldstein is Gita's former neighbor, who lived near her family before being taken to Birkenau. Gita is astounded to reunite with Mrs. Goldstein in her block after having already spent a fair amount of time in the concentration camps. After they greet each other, Mrs. Goldstein regrettably tells Gita that her parents and sisters were taken by the Nazis and that everyone believes them to be dead.

Mendel Bauer – A young prisoner who was caught after escaping Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mendel Bauer comes to Lale and asks if he can help him avoid execution. Accordingly, Lale arranges for Mendel to be put on a transport leaving the camp that night, thereby allowing him to slip away before the Nazis

come to execute him the following morning.

Friedrich – A Russian soldier, Friedrich drives Lale to and from town each day so that Lale can carry out his job as the liaison between his Russian captors and the women they want to bring back to their chalet. Over time, Lale develops a friendly relationship with Friedrich, eventually earning his trust. When Friedrich is later transferred away, he and the other Russians trust Lale enough to let him drive himself to town, thereby giving him the opportunity to escape.

Goldie – Goldie is Lale's sister, and the only member of his family who still lives at home when he returns from the concentration camps. Goldie tells Lale that their parents were taken by the Nazis and that their brother was killed while serving as a resistance fighter. As for herself, she has married a Russian man. And though she's overjoyed to see Lale again, she insists that he must go find Gita because he loves her so much.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Commandant Rudolf Hoess – Rudolf Hoess is the commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau, making him the highest-ranking Nazi in the concentration camps. He is the first Nazi to address Lale and his fellow prisoners when they reach the camps, telling them that the only way to survive is by following orders.

Bella – Bella is a prisoner who works as a secretary in the administration building, where Lale goes when he needs to replenish his tattooing supplies.

TERMS

Kapo – During the Holocaust, kapos were prisoners appointed by the Nazis to supervise the other prisoners. The kapos were granted a number of privileges and they were largely drawn from groups of violent criminals, meaning that they were often brutal and vicious in their roles.

Sonderkommando – The Sonderkommando were prisoners in the concentration camps who were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoriums, where they carried out the disposal of dead bodies. If they refused to do this, they would be killed.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SURVIVAL AND MORALITY

Heather Morris's novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is an examination of the lengths to which people are willing to go in order to survive harrowing experiences. Based on the true story of Lale's time at the Nazi concentration camp known as Auschwitz-II Birkenau, the novel follows the young man's attempt to stay alive throughout the Holocaust. One of the reasons Lale is ultimately able to escape death is because he becomes the camp's *Tätowierer*, the tattooist who inscribes numbers onto each prisoner's arm when they arrive in the concentration camp. At first, he thinks he will be unable to do this, finding the idea of forcibly tattooing women particularly disturbing. However, he sets aside his reservations when he realizes that he has no choice, deciding that his best chance of surviving will be to simply follow orders. This raises questions about what, exactly, is considered morally permissible when facing the threat of death. Although Lale's job as the tattooist only marginally harms his fellow prisoners, the practice of doing whatever it takes to survive becomes harder to swallow in other situations—like when Lale learns that his friend Jakub has been forced to work as the camp's torturer, beating and killing prisoners for the Nazis. By drawing attention to the horrible things the Nazis force prisoners to do, Morris pushes readers to consider the extent to which unethical behavior can be justified in the name of survival, ultimately suggesting that standard conceptions of morality often shift under the weight of unmitigated evil.

Morris frames subservience as one of the only tactics available to people who want to survive Auschwitz, which today is largely recognized as one of the worst Nazi concentration camps to have existed. Before Lale even reaches Auschwitz, he intuits that the smallest deviation from Nazi orders will result in violent punishment or even execution, a fact that is confirmed when the SS officers beat anyone who doesn't immediately follow instructions after being let off the train upon arrival at the camp. Understanding this harsh reality, Lale resolves to follow orders when he can, deciding that he will make it out of Auschwitz someday by doing what he's told and avoiding scrutiny. Sooner than he might have expected, though, he's forced to put this resolution to the test, since one of his early assignments as the camp's tattooist is to mark a group of women whose identification numbers have faded. As somebody who has always respected and coveted women, Lale finds the prospect of gouging numbers into their skin nearly unthinkable—but his mentor, Pepan, tells him he has no choice. This, Pepan helps Lale see, is one of the only ways he'll manage to stay alive in Auschwitz, especially since being the tattooist comes with special privileges and extra food. Moreover, Pepan suggests that somebody will take Lale's place as the tattooist if he refuses, thereby making it even harder for Lale to turn away from this unlikely opportunity to increase his chances of survival. As a result, readers see the way difficult circumstances

can refigure a person's moral resolve.

What's more, Pepan's arguments about why Lale should become the tattooist underscore the moral reasoning that contributes to such decisions. After all, not only will Lale have a better chance of surviving if he takes this job, but the Nazis will easily find somebody else to tattoo the incoming prisoners if Lale turns down the offer. Consequently, Lale feels somewhat relieved of his hesitation to permanently mark his fellow prisoners against their will, knowing that this will still happen to them even if he refuses the post. Pepan also suggests that somebody "who has less soul" than Lale might become the tattooist and do the job carelessly, causing the prisoners unnecessary pain—pain that Lale would try his best to alleviate. It's worth noting that although this reasoning is understandable and logical, it doesn't necessarily absolve Lale of all moral responsibility. There are, of course, many different approaches to the study of ethics, but some might say that agreeing to do something immoral is never permissible, since engaging in immoral behavior only perpetuates wrongdoing. And yet, the very real and miserable reality is that if everyone at Auschwitz refused to follow orders, the Nazis would kill them without hesitation. By highlighting this dynamic, then, Morris reveals the uncomfortable fact that unfortunate circumstances sometimes make upholding one's moral convictions practically impossible or futile.

Even though bleak circumstances can make it difficult to follow a strict moral compass, some actions are certainly more justifiable than others. For instance, although Lale thinks it's wrong for him to tattoo unwilling prisoners, his job as the tattooist won't in and of itself destroy a person's life. By contrast, his friend Jakub's job as the camp's torturer has more serious implications, since he's expected to hurt and kill his fellow prisoners. However, even Jakub manages to reframe his horrific job, attempting to find the least immoral way of going about his task. When the Nazis want to know who helped Lale smuggle jewels and gems into the camp, they force Jakub to beat him. Before doing so, though, Jakub secretly tells his friend that he shouldn't give up the names. He explains that he will try to spare Lale as best he can but he says he would rather kill Lale than report more names to the Nazis, adding that he would "kill one Jew to save ten others." Needless to say, hurting or killing another human is immoral, but Jakub's survival depends upon carrying out this role—and in the same way that Lale takes the job as the tattooist because he thinks he will at least be able to carry out the task gently, Jakub tries his best to minimize the harm he inflicts. In turn, Morris suggests that people attempting to survive harrowing experiences should strive to be as moral as their circumstances allow, even if those circumstances require an altered kind of morality.



FAITH, LOVE, AND OPTIMISM

The Tattooist of Auschwitz showcases the ways in which hope fuels resilience. This is made evident by the fact that many of Lale's fellow prisoners turn to their religious faith in order to withstand the terrible treatment they endure at the hands of the Nazis. This belief in something greater than themselves helps them make it from one day to the next, but Lale finds himself unable to maintain his own Jewish beliefs in the face of such horror. However, he remains generally optimistic about his future, vowing to himself that he will live to see the day the Nazis pay for their horrific, inhumane actions. In keeping with this mindset, Lale allows his love for Gita—another prisoner he meets while tattooing a group of women—to guide his thoughts and prevent him from succumbing to hopelessness. At first, Gita is hesitant to let herself think about her future with Lale, since their prospects of surviving Auschwitz are so slim. However, Lale convinces her that "there will be a tomorrow" for them, a future in which they will be free to start a family and kiss or have sex whenever they want. This, in turn, not only makes it just a little easier for them to endure otherwise unbearable circumstances, but also gives them both something to live for. In other words, their love gives them something to believe in when all else seems hopeless and futile. Fittingly, then, Morris intimates that optimism is often attainable even in dire times, especially when that optimism is founded upon love.

As early as his first night in Auschwitz, Lale responds to adversity not by losing all hope, but by committing himself to a stubborn form of optimism. Walking outside to find a place to urinate, he notices several other prisoners sitting above a ditch, all of them relieving themselves while quietly conversing. Just as Lale is about to approach, two Nazis walk by and—completely unprovoked—they shoot the men sitting above the ditch before casually walking away. This is the first act of senseless, sadistic violence that Lale has ever witnessed, but instead of letting it demoralize him to a point of total hopelessness he responds by making a promise to himself: "*I will live to leave this place. I will walk out a free man.*" This suggests that Lale is somebody who naturally gravitates toward hopefulness, even when facing unspeakable tragedies.

At the same time, though, Lale isn't capable of maintaining all kinds of faith. For instance, he finds himself unable to continue his commitment to Judaism once he reaches Auschwitz and he witnesses so much horror. As many of his fellow prisoners devote themselves to prayer, he can't find it within himself to join them. Still, the mere fact that the Jewish people around Lale are able to stay in touch with their religious faith—the very thing for which the Nazis are persecuting them—suggests that believing in something larger than oneself is a powerful way of coping with hardship. Moreover, their undisturbed commitment to Judaism indicates that sometimes adversity only strengthens a person's resolve. After all, the prisoners who

continue to practice Judaism in spite of the Nazi's persecution have doubled down on their religious convictions rather than giving up hope. In light of this, readers see that faith often prevails in unlikely circumstances.

Although Lale can't bring himself to continue practicing his religion in Auschwitz, he still believes in something larger than himself: love. Even before he meets Gita, he feels destined to someday find a partner who will make his life feel complete, which is perhaps one of the reasons he vows to himself that he'll survive Auschwitz, since he hasn't yet experienced what it's like to be in love. It isn't surprising, then, that he later derives so much strength and hope from his bond with Gita. Upon cementing their connection, he incorporates his determination to survive into their relationship, saying that he'll not only stay alive, but survive *with* Gita, with whom he's determined to start a family. Throughout their time in the camp, Lale reminds Gita that they will someday be able to kiss and have sex whenever they want. In fact, this last promise partially comes true before they're even out of Auschwitz, since Lale manages to bribe Gita's kapo into letting them spend time alone with each other. The first time they have sex, the act "strengthens [Lale's] resolve to go on another day, and another day, for a thousand days, for however long it takes for them to live by his words to Gita: 'To be free to make love wherever, whenever [they] want to.'" Simply put, their love makes it even easier for Lale to maintain his hope for the future. It also takes the place of religious faith, allowing him to remain optimistic even though he can no longer find it within himself to believe in his religion. By depicting the fortifying effects of both religious belief and love, Morris helps readers see that faith can come in many different forms and can sustain people through truly horrible experiences, even when optimism seems unattainable.



UNITY, SACRIFICE, AND EMPATHY

In *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, Heather Morris underlines the importance of unity in times of hardship. As a prisoner at Auschwitz, Lale fully

depends upon his fellow prisoners, some of whom save his life several times. What's more, the few uplifting moments he has in the camps come not from surviving as an individual, but from the connections he develops with other prisoners. However, he also fears division, recognizing that his privileged position as the camp's tattooist threatens to pull him away from the other prisoners. With this in mind, Lale acknowledges that the favoritism the guards show him actually puts him at risk among the camp's other inhabitants, since people might resent him for receiving special treatment. The way he ensures that this doesn't happen is by using his position to do more than simply improve his own life, ultimately going out of his way to help whomever he can. In doing so, he not only avoids resentment but he finds that empathy has a way of circling back and perpetuating itself. This becomes clear when Jakub—a random

man Lale once went out of his way to help on Jakub's first night in the concentration camp—ends up saving Lale's life years later, when the Nazis catch Lale smuggling jewels and money into the camp. Accordingly, Morris illustrates that empathy, compassion, and self-sacrifice often lead to meaningful forms of unity, connection, and communal support.

Lale learns the value of standing together with his fellow prisoners early on in his stay at Auschwitz. In his first weeks, he develops a friendship with his bunkmate, Aron, whom Lale helps stay optimistic and positive. Then, when Lale becomes gravely ill, Aron does everything he can to take care of him and make sure that the Nazis don't learn about his feeble health, since they would surely kill him. In the end, caring for Lale costs Aron his life because a kapo—a prisoner who acts as a supervisor for the SS—responds angrily to Aron's attempt to help Lale and the kapo kills Aron simply because the kapo wants to inflict suffering on somebody. When Lale regains consciousness after his illness and he asks the other prisoners what happened, they tell him that Aron was responsible for Lale's survival, explaining that they were inspired by Aron's efforts to save Lale and they therefore continued to help Lale in the aftermath of Aron's death. In keeping with this, they tell him that Aron wanted to "save 'the one,'" a sentiment Lale recognizes from the Talmud, an important religious text of Rabbinic Judaism. From this point on, Lale uses this perspective as a way of navigating life in Auschwitz, frequently repeating, "Save the one, save the world." In fact, this viewpoint factors into the way he approaches his job as the tattooist, encouraging him to use the privileges this position affords him to help others when he can. Consequently, readers see that Aron's empathy and willingness to put himself in danger to save Lale ends up influencing Lale and it therefore has a large impact on many people's lives in the camp. This suggests that such selflessness leads to a chain effect of kindness.

Before Lale starts using his position as the tattooist to help others, though, he worries that the job will put him in danger. Although he enjoys the fact that his job earns him extra rations, a private room, and a sense of protection from the otherwise merciless guards, he fears that these privileges will also make him *less* safe, since it's possible that some prisoners will conspire against him to get his job. This, it seems, is the kind of divisive attitude that the Nazis hope will take root in Auschwitz—after all, why else would they break the prisoners up into different factions, giving some people power over others? By doing this, they institute a crippling sense of hierarchy that threatens to disrupt the unity and camaraderie which people facing such harrowing circumstances need in order to emotionally survive. To Lale's credit, though, he doesn't succumb to the individualistic thinking that Auschwitz's power structure produces. This is perhaps because he already knows that the only reason he's alive is because Aron and a small group of strangers risked their own lives to help him,

thereby demonstrating the communal strength to which unity and compassion can lead. Therefore, he chooses to do whatever he can to help others, sneaking his extra rations to hungry prisoners, instituting a forbidden bartering system, and generally sacrificing his safety for the good of his fellow prisoners.

Of course, Morris's primary argument in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is not that people should practice empathy because it benefits them, but because communal support and compassion lead to a better world at large. This is what the Talmudic notion that "to save one is to save the world" suggests, ultimately asserting that isolated acts of empathy can have effects that extend beyond isolated circumstances. While tattooing incoming prisoners one day, Lale meets a man named Jakub. As Lale tattoos his arm, Jakub whispers that he's hungry, and though Lale knows it's a risk, he tells Jakub to hide near him until the end of the day, at which point he sneaks Jakub back to his room and gives him extra rations. Lale does this because he knows Jakub will starve to death if he has to wait to eat until the following day. Needless to say, Lale doesn't help Jakub for any tangible benefit to himself. And yet, he *does* end up benefitting from showing Jakub kindness, since Jakub—who goes on to become the camp's torturer—spares Lale when the Nazis order Jakub to torture him. In turn, it becomes clear that acts of empathy perpetuate themselves and that treating others with kindness and compassion is the best way of standing in unity against malicious evils—evils against which it would be impossible for individuals to survive on their own.



KNOWLEDGE, UNCERTAINTY, AND POWER

In *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, Heather Morris presents knowledge as a form of power, especially for people at the mercy of oppressive regimes. To illustrate the importance of knowledge, she shows the horror that accompanies the uncertainty surrounding what will happen to Lale and his fellow prisoners in Auschwitz. For Lale, some of this uncertainty is alleviated by the fact that he speaks multiple languages, enabling him to gather information from guards who assume he can't understand German. Later, his job as the camp's tattooist gives him a modicum of certainty that he'll survive each day, at least insofar as the position generally keeps the Nazis from randomly harming him. Nonetheless, Lale's entire life remains infused with uncertainty, since he doesn't know what happened to his family after he was taken by the Nazis and, in a more immediate sense, he doesn't know what his future in Auschwitz holds. Still, though, Lale finds ways to use knowledge to his benefit, especially when he's moved to a concentration camp in Mauthausen, Austria in the final days of the Nazi regime, at which point Lale uses his fluency in German to win the favor of an SS guard, who allows Lale to transfer to a less dangerous camp in Vienna even though the camp doesn't

normally accept Jewish prisoners. It is from this camp that Lale finally escapes, simply walking out of a hole in the fence. Bearing this chain of events in mind, readers see that knowledge is a powerful asset, one that not only helps people withstand the emotional torture of uncertainty, but also overcome oppression.

From the very beginning of Lale's experience during the Holocaust, he is faced with an ominous kind of uncertainty. This is made evident early in the novel, when he wonders what has become of his family now that he's been taken to Auschwitz—a question that will continue to haunt him throughout his time in the camp. The effect of uncertainty on Lale's predicament is actually apparent even *before* he reaches Auschwitz, since the ambiguity surrounding the exact nature of the Germans' agenda is what leads him to leave home in the first place. Indeed, he willingly presents himself to the Nazis when the Germans announce that all Jewish families must present a child over 18 to work for the government. Not knowing that he's destined for Auschwitz, Lale follows these orders, thereby underlining the tangible impact of uncertainty and ambiguity on his life—the lack of knowledge surrounding what will happen to him directly informs his willingness to submit to the Nazis, though it's worth noting that he also presents himself to the enemy as a way of trying to ensure that the rest of his family remains safe, something he would most likely do regardless of whether or not he knew what was in store for him. As a result, readers see that the uninformed decision that Lale makes by offering himself to the Nazis is later compounded by the fact that he doesn't even know if his sacrifice had the intended effect, since he has no idea what has become of his family. This, it seems, is one of the ways that the Nazis are able to take control: by withholding information and spreading uncertainty, they are able to oppress Europe's entire Jewish population.

Although Lale lacks vital information about what will become of him, he attempts to make up for the uncertainty pervading his life by putting what knowledge he *does* have to use. To that end, his eventual job as Auschwitz's tattooist gives him access to information he wouldn't otherwise have, and it also lends him a rare sense of stability, since most guards won't randomly kill the camp's tattooist because the job is considered part of the SS. Emboldened by this small sense of protection, Lale uses his insider's knowledge to benefit other prisoners. For instance, Lale overhears one day in an administrative building that there will be a transport leaving for another camp at midnight, and he uses this knowledge to save a prisoner who is supposed to be executed the following day, pulling strings to get the man on the list of people leaving that night. In this regard, it becomes clear that knowledge can—in the right circumstances—be a very powerful tool, one that can mean the difference between life and death.

The insider's information Lale gains as the tattooist isn't the only way he uses knowledge to his benefit. He also puts his

language skills to use, finding himself in a unique position as one of the only prisoners who can converse with seemingly everyone present—a rare asset, since so many prisoners hail from different countries. During Lale’s first day of labor, he talks to two Russian men, learning the best ways to go about his job. While listening to them, he senses he’s gaining valuable “ammunition” by absorbing the ins and outs of daily life in Auschwitz. Similarly, he uses his language skills when he’s transferred to another concentration camp in the final weeks of the war. After observing the dynamics at this camp, he learns which SS officers are approachable and he develops a rapport with one of them, impressing the officer with his flawless German. This particular officer is intrigued to hear about Auschwitz, having never been to the camp himself. This puts Lale in a relative position of power, allowing him to share information with the officer and endear himself to the man, who offers to have Lale transferred to a safer camp in Vienna. That this final camp leads to Lale’s freedom is important to note, as it highlights the crucial role that his mastery and knowledge of foreign languages plays in his ability to survive the Holocaust. Simply put, Lale’s capacity to manipulate his base of knowledge to his benefit emerges as a form of power, proving that a clever command of information can often become an unmatched weapon for people who are otherwise at a complete disadvantage.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



LALE’S SUPPLY BAG

Because Lale’s supply bag indicates that Lale technically works for the “political wing of the SS,” the bag—in which Lale keeps his tattooing instruments—comes to signify the added protection that Lale’s job affords him. When Lale first becomes the tattooist, he learns that none of the Nazis will bother him if he carries his bag everywhere he goes, since none of them want to be accused of interfering with somebody affiliated with the SS. Of course, this also means that he is directly involved with the Nazis and therefore that he is—however unwillingly—part of the regime working to persecute his fellow prisoners. As a result, Lale’s bag comes to represent not only the safety that Lale gains from his position, but also the fraught implications and interpersonal dynamics that come along with working for the SS.



THE AMERICAN PLANE

The American plane that flies over Auschwitz-Birkenau one day symbolizes hope, though it is

perhaps a bit more complicated than that. Upon seeing the plane, Lale and his fellow prisoners become hopeful that the rest of the world will soon take note of what’s happening in the concentration camps. After all, the prisoners who run outside and try to direct the plane toward the crematoriums end up dying when the plane eventually flies away and the Nazis open fire on anyone who tried to communicate with the pilot. In many ways, then, one might argue that the American plane actually represents a profound *lack* of hope, since the prisoners’ sudden optimism quickly turns to horror. However, Lale later considers the fact that the mere presence of the plane in the first place suggests that the outside world is beginning to pay attention to the Nazis’ inhumane behavior. Thinking this way, he allows himself to believe that the prisoners who died trying to direct the plane toward the crematoriums did not die in vain, thinking that they perhaps successfully alerted the Americans to the horrors taking place in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In turn, the plane *does* emerge as a sign of hopefulness, ultimately suggesting that it’s sometimes necessary to remain optimistic (like Lale) in order to nurture a sense of hope in times of hardship.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper edition of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* published in 2018.

Chapter 1 Quotes

What they all share is fear. And youth. And their religion. Lale tries to keep his mind off theorizing about what might lie ahead. He has been told he is being taken to work for the Germans, and that is what he is planning to do. He thinks of his family back home. *Safe*. He has made the sacrifice, has no regrets. He would make it again and again to keep his beloved family at home, together.

Related Characters: Lale

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5



Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lale rides in an overcrowded cattle car on a train destined for Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, though he doesn’t know this. All he knows is that he and all the other men in the cattle car have been forced to present themselves to the Nazis because they’re Jewish. Rather than speculating about the unknown future, though, Lale

tries to focus on the idea that he has reported to the Germans as a worker. This, then, “is what he is planning to do”: work. Thinking this way enables Lale to embody a spirit of optimism, giving him something to cling to in an otherwise uncertain and frightening time. More importantly, he reminds himself that he is here because he gave himself up to the Nazis in the hopes of sparing his family, since the Nazis demanded that each Jewish family in Slovakia furnish the government with one able-bodied worker. In this sense, Lale sees his current situation as little more than a necessary sacrifice he made in the name of his family’s safety, thereby coming to terms with his situation because what he cares most about is protecting his loved ones. As a result, even at this early stage in the novel, readers see that Lale is motivated not by self-interest, but by his desire to help others.

●● Lale clings to his suitcase, hoping that with the money and clothes he has, he might be able to buy himself out from wherever they are headed, or at the very least buy himself into a safe job. *Maybe there’ll be work where I can use my languages.*

Related Characters: Lale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

As Lale rides in the cattle car toward Auschwitz-Birkenau, he considers the vast uncertainty regarding his future. He has been told that he’ll be put to work by the Nazis, which is why he has chosen to wear a nice suit, wanting to increase his chances of impressing whomever will serve as his boss. Of course, Lale is—at this point—rather naïve to think that he’ll be working in a position that would require him to wear a suit, considering that he’s destined for one of the most dangerous concentration camps in Europe. However, his thought process in this moment is worth tracking, since it reveals his tendency to search for ways to make the best of his situation. To that end, Lale wonders if he’ll be able to “buy himself into a safe job,” a thought that aligns with his later efforts inside Birkenau to use his position as the camp’s tattooist to his advantage, drawing upon whatever power is available to him in order to survive. Furthermore, when Lale considers the fact that he might be able to use his linguistic skills to his benefit, readers learn not only that he can speak multiple different languages, but also that he knows how to exploit this skill. And though Lale doesn’t end

up working the kind of job he originally hoped for, it is the case that he’s able to use his knowledge of languages to impress his superiors and gain valuable information about the camps, proving that his knowledge and resourceful spirit are his most important assets.

●● “We’ll all be dead from starvation by morning,” says someone in the back of the block.

“And at peace,” a hollow voice adds.

“These mattresses have hay in them,” someone else says.


“Maybe we should continue to act like cattle and eat that.”

Snatches of quiet laughter. No response from the officer.

And then, from deep in the dormitory, a hesitant “Mooooooo…”

Laughter. Quiet, but real. The officer, present but invisible, doesn’t interrupt, and eventually the men fall asleep, stomachs rumbling.

Related Characters: Lale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This passage details Lale’s first night in Birkenau, when he and his fellow prisoners are taken to Block 7 after receiving their tattoos and uniforms. Flustered from the multi-day train ride to the concentration camp, the prisoners are sent to bed without food, despite the fact that they’ve gone days without any kind of sustenance. For this reason, one of the prisoners asks the guard when they’ll get to eat, and the guard informs them that they will receive breakfast in the morning. In response, another prisoner complains that many of them will die of starvation before the morning, but the guard doesn’t respond. Instead, other prisoners chime in, as one person suggests that death would be preferable to living in such difficult conditions. However, not everyone adopts this cynical mindset—in fact, several of the prisoners choose to embrace a sense of optimism by joking about their misfortune, pretending to be cows and laughing along with each other. In doing so, they commiserate with one another, sharing their misery while simultaneously trying to buoy their spirits. In turn, it becomes clear that humor and optimism can emerge in even the most abysmal situations—a fact that resonates with Lale’s recurring decision throughout the novel to maintain his faith that he will survive his time at Birkenau.

☞ As they disappear into the darkness, Lale makes a vow to himself: *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.* He thinks of his family back in Krompachy and hopes that his presence here is at least saving them from a similar fate.

Related Characters: Lale

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27



Explanation and Analysis

In the middle of Lale's first night at Birkenau, he gets up to urinate. Going outside, he sees a ditch, over which three prisoners are sitting. These three men are quietly conversing as they relieve themselves. As they do this, two Nazis approach, draw their guns, and kill all three prisoners for no reason before apathetically walking away. Lale witnesses this in the cover of nearby shadows and he can't believe what he has just seen, struggling to grasp the guards' utter malice and mercilessness. What's most important to note about this scene, though, is that Lale doesn't let this horrible experience demoralize him. Rather than giving up all hope of survival, he invests himself even more ferociously in the project of staying alive, promising himself that he will live to leave Birkenau as a "free man." Furthermore, he thinks of his family, once more revealing the extent to which he is motivated to survive by his connections to other people. Accordingly, readers see that Lale's resilience springs not only from his ability to withstand adversity, but also from his capacity to love and cherish his relationships with others.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Whenever possible, he listens to the talk and gossip of the SS, who don't know he understands them. They give him ammunition of the only sort available to him—knowledge, to be stored up for later.

Related Characters: Lale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

As Lale becomes more or less accustomed life in Birkenau, he starts trying to learn more about his surroundings. In this context, his language skills turn out to be quite

advantageous, since he can listen to SS officers talk even when they think they're having private conversations. In this way, Lale gains information to which he wouldn't otherwise have access, making it that much likelier that he'll be able to survive or at least avoid situations that might otherwise take him by surprise and get him killed. As Morris calls attention to this dynamic, it becomes clear to readers that knowledge is indeed one of the only kinds of "ammunition" available to Lale, since it's the only thing that can empower him without attracting attention from the Nazis. This is an important concept to bear in mind as the novel progresses, especially since Lale's eventual job as the tattooist ends up giving him an even greater understanding of the inner workings of the camp, thereby granting him valuable "ammunition."


☞ "You want me to tattoo other men?"

"Someone has to do it."

"I don't think I could do that. Scar someone, hurt someone—it does hurt, you know."

Pepan pulls back his sleeve to reveal his own number. "It hurts like hell. If you don't take the job, someone will who has less soul than you do, and he will hurt these people more."

Related Characters: Pepan, Lale (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Pepan, the camp's tattooist, has just suggested that Lale should become his assistant. At first, Lale doesn't want to accept this job offer because he has qualms about "scar[ring]" and "hurt[ing]" people. This is a legitimate concern, since the tattooist not only painfully marks unwilling prisoners, but the process also alters their bodies for the rest of their lives. However, Pepan helps Lale put these misgivings to rest by pointing out that Lale, too, received a tattoo when he first arrived in the concentration camps. Nobody, Pepan intimates, enters the camps without first getting a tattoo. This calls attention to the fact that the Nazis will end up tattooing new prisoners regardless of who they assign to do the job. With this in mind, Pepan notes that Lale should accept the job because somebody else will take it if he doesn't, and that person might not be as kindhearted as Lale. This line of thinking suggests that although it's not particularly moral to tattoo unwilling

prisoners, it is moral for a person to do whatever it takes to make this process as painless and empathetic as possible. In turn, Pepan shows Lale that it is sometimes necessary for people to slightly alter their conception of morality when operating in the midst of evil.

“Aron could have told him you were ill, but he feared the kapo would add you to the death cart again if he knew, so he said you were already gone.”

“And the kapo discovered the truth?”



“No,” yawns the man, exhausted from work. “But he was so pissed off, he took Aron anyway.”

Lale struggles to contain his tears.

The second bunkmate rolls onto his elbow. “You put big ideas into his head. He wanted to save ‘the one.’”

“To save one is to save the world,” Lale completes the phrase.

Related Characters: Lale (speaker), Aron

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis



During this exchange, the men in Lale’s block fill him in on what happened while he was sick with typhus. They explain that Aron saved Lale’s life by pulling him off of the Nazi’s “death cart” but that, unfortunately, the kapo who came looking for Lale was so angry when Aron lied and said Lale had already been taken away that he (the kapo) decided to kill Aron. Hearing this, Lale is distraught and beside himself, recognizing that Aron gave his life in order to keep him alive. This, of course, is the ultimate sacrifice, one that Lale will never be able to repay because Aron is gone. As Lale continues to listen to his bunkmates, he learns that they continued to help him because they were inspired by Aron’s idea—drawn from the important Jewish text known as the Talmud—that “to save one is to save the world.” This is an noteworthy idea, one that is central to *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, since Lale takes the notion to heart and he commits himself from here on out to helping his fellow prisoners whenever he can, even when doing so puts him in danger. In turn, readers see that kindness and self-sacrifice perpetuate themselves, as people facing hardship tend to support one another in ways that spread from one person to the next.

Chapter 3 Quotes

“Should I be fearful, now that I am privileged? Why do I feel sad about leaving my old position in the camp, even though it offered me no protection? He wanders into the shadows of the half-finished buildings. He is alone.

That night, Lale sleeps stretched out for the first time in months. No one to kick, no one to push him. In the luxury of his own bed, he feels like a king. And just like a king, he must now be wary of people’s motives for befriending him or taking him into their confidence. *Are they jealous? Do they want my job? Do I run the risk of being wrongfully accused of something?* He has seen the consequences of greed and mistrust here. [...] He is sure that as he left the block and walked past the bunks of beaten men, he heard someone mutter the word “collaborator.”

Related Characters: Aron, Pepan, Lale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lale considers the fact that, as the camp’s new tattooist, he now has certain privileges that other prisoners don’t. For instance, he has a private room and he’s given extra rations of food. Needless to say, these things will make it easier for him to survive in a physical sense, but what he realizes in this moment is that his newfound perks might destructively set him apart from the communal network of prisoners he cultivated while living in Block 7. Given that Lale is only alive because people like Pepan and Aron went out of their way to support him when he had typhus, it’s obvious that friends are very important in the dangerous world of Birkenau, where prisoners often have to depend upon one another in order to ensure their safety.

As a result, Lale’s separation from the other prisoners unexpectedly puts him at something of a disadvantage, not only cutting him off from possible avenues of support but also turning him into a possible target of sorts, since some prisoners might become envious of his position and thus try to sabotage him. These misgivings are important to keep in mind as the narrative progresses, since they shed light on Lale’s repeated decisions to use his power to help others—a sign that he hasn’t forgotten that the most valuable form of security in the concentration camps comes in the form of friendship, unity, and human connection, not privilege or authority.

“Very nice,” Baretski says as he and Lale walk away. Lale ignores him and fights to control the hatred he feels.

“Would you like to meet her?” Again, Lale refuses to respond.

“Write to her, tell her you like her.”

How stupid does he think I am?

“I’ll get you paper and a pencil and bring her your letter. What do you say? Do you know her name?”

4562.

Lale walks on. He knows that the penalty for a prisoner caught with a pen or paper is death.

Related Characters: Baretski (speaker), Gita, Lale

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

This is an interaction that takes place between Baretski and Lale after Baretski notices Lale’s attraction to Gita. While standing outside one Sunday morning, Lale faces Gita, who returns his gaze. This is a tender moment, the first time they’ve encountered each other since Lale re-inked Gita’s tattoo—the initial interaction that so thoroughly flustered Lale and made him aware of his feelings for Gita. Before they can speak, though, Baretski approaches Lale and ruins the moment, steering him away from Gita and speaking patronizingly about what he’s just seen. What’s perhaps most strange about this interaction is that Baretski intrudes upon—and therefore ruins—Lale and Gita’s tender moment but he also apparently takes an interest in their developing relationship, even offering to help Lale take things to the next level by relaying a letter to her on his behalf. The problem, of course, is that Lale doesn’t know whether or not he can trust Baretski.

This is a dynamic that resurfaces time and again as Baretski and Lale get to know each other. Because of the gross power imbalance between the two men, it is never clear whether or not Baretski actually cares about Lale or if he is simply bored and he’s trying to entertain himself by meddling in Lale’s life—or, for that matter, if he’s actively trying to bait Lale into doing something for which Baretski could then punish him. This, at least, is what Lale is afraid of in this moment, as he notes that he could be killed for simply possessing a pen and paper. As Baretski and Lale’s interactions continue to unfold, it’s worth keeping this tension in mind, since any act of kindness on Baretski’s part is unavoidably complicated by the fact that he is a Nazi actively working to suppress Jewish people like Lale.

Chapter 4 Quotes


“Do you have a sister?”

“Yeah,” says Baretski, “two.”

“Is how you treat women the way you want other men to treat your sisters?”

“Anyone does that to my kid sister and I’ll kill them.” Baretski pulls his pistol from its holster and fires several shots into the air. “I’ll kill them.”

Related Characters: Baretski, Lale (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

As Lale and Baretski spend more time together, Baretski reveals his interest in women. As a young man without much experience, Baretski is eager to hear about the older Lale’s various exploits with women. Because Lale recognizes that connecting with Baretski (or at least *appearing* to connect with him) might ultimately endear him to the officer and help his chances of survival, he indulges Baretski and listens to him talk about women. However, when Baretski says that all he wants is to have sex with women, Lale can’t hide his disapproval, so he attempts to show Baretski why what he’s said is problematic. To do so, he urges Baretski to simply reconsider what he’s said, asking him how he’d feel if a man spoke in this disparaging way about his sisters. By asking this, Lale encourages Baretski to think empathetically, hoping that the officer will be able to shift his perspective to more thoughtfully consider what he’s just said.

In response, though, Baretski shoots his gun in the air and he goes into a rage. This suggests that Baretski is quite incapable of stepping into someone else’s shoes and considering how they might feel. Needless to say, this inability to broaden his perspective aligns with the fact that he’s a Nazi who doesn’t seem to care about the horrible things he’s helping to inflict upon innocent Jewish men and women. Rather than thinking about how his actions influence other people, Baretski thinks only of his very limited perspective, failing to empathize with anyone unless they have a direct impact on his own life.

●● Lale finds out that Baretski isn't German but was born in Romania, in a small town near the border of Slovakia, only a few hundred miles from Lale's hometown of Krompachy. He ran away from home to Berlin and joined the Hitler Youth and then the SS. He hates his father, who used to beat him and his brothers and sisters viciously. He is worried about his sisters, one younger, one older, who still live at home.

Later that night as they walk back to Birkenau, Lale says quietly, "I'll take your offer of paper and pencil, if you don't mind. Her number is 4562."

Related Characters: Lale (speaker), Gita, Baretski

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Although Lale struggles to connect with Baretski because the man is so incapable of empathy, it's clear that Baretski has taken a liking to Lale. This is because Lale gets Baretski to talk about his personal life, effectively modeling what an empathetic person is like by demonstrating his ability to listen to others and try to understand their worldviews. In this way, he learns a fair amount about Baretski's background, hearing about how Baretski ended up becoming an SS officer in the first place. More importantly, though, Lale learns that Baretski is worried about the wellbeing of his sisters—yet another sign that Baretski is capable of feeling for others as long as those people have a direct impact on his own life. Still, hearing about Baretski's private worries seems to show Lale that the man is capable of at least some version of human sensitivity, which is most likely why he agrees that night to take Baretski up on his offer to pass a note to Gita, a female prisoner with whom Lale is infatuated. When Baretski first offered this, Lale turned him down because he worried Baretski might be trying to get him in trouble. Now, though, he trusts Baretski enough to let him do him a small favor—a sign that it's often possible to connect in small ways with people even if those people are, on the whole, morally corrupt.

Chapter 5 Quotes


●● Without warning, the SS officer outside their block hits Gita in the back with his rifle. Both girls crash to the ground. Gita cries out in pain. He indicates with his rifle for them to get up. They stand, their eyes downcast.

He looks at them with disgust and snarls, "Wipe the smile from your face." He takes his pistol from its holster and pushes it hard against Gita's temple. He gives the instruction to another officer: "No food for them today."

As he walks away, their kapo advances and slaps them both quickly across the face. "Don't forget where you are." She walks away, and Gita rests her head on Dana's shoulder.

"I told you Lale's going to talk to me next Sunday, didn't I?"

Related Characters: Gita (speaker), Lale, Dana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Once Lale and Gita start passing notes to each other, their lives change. Both of them suddenly feel happy and excited about the future, despite the fact that their overall circumstances haven't changed. This is especially evident when Gita and her friend Dana get in trouble simply because they've been smiling, both of them giddy about the relationship developing between Gita and Lale. Seeing this, a cruel SS officer hits Gita in the back and he tells both women to stop smiling, clearly trying to demoralize them and make sure they feel as if it's impossible to be happy in the harrowing world of the concentration camps. Seeing this, their kapo tells them to remember where they are, thereby underlining the idea that prisoners should be in a constant state of misery.

And yet, nothing about either of these exchanges interferes with Gita's happiness and excitement. Instead of feeling frightened or sorrowful, Gita turns to Dana and she reminds her that Lale is going to talk to her the following Sunday, demonstrating that there is truly nothing that will take Gita's mind off of her new lover. As a result, readers see that love is uniquely capable of uplifting people in even the most upsetting and depressing circumstances. What's more, that Dana so thoroughly shares Gita's excitement suggests that optimism in times of hardship can become contagious, passing from one person to the next and helping otherwise hopeless souls find motivation to keep fighting for survival.

☝ “I’m just a number. You should know that. You gave it to me.”

“Yes, but that’s just in here. Who are you outside of here?”

“Outside doesn’t exist anymore. There’s only here.”

[...]

“I don’t want to upset you, but will you promise me one thing?”

“What?”

“That before we leave here, you will tell me who you are and where you come from.”

She looks him in the eye. “Yes, I promise.”

“I’m happy with that for now. [...].”

Related Characters: Gita, Lale (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Lale and Gita finally have a face-to-face conversation after passing notes back and forth. It is clear that they’re both interested in each other, but Gita hesitates to share information about herself with Lale. When he asks about her life before she was taken to Birkenau, she refuses to tell him anything, saying that she is “just a number”—a number that Lale himself tattooed onto her forearm forever. By saying this, Gita indicates that she doesn’t want to get her hopes up about the prospect of ever returning to her life outside the walls of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Accordingly, she wants to focus only on the person she is in this very moment: a prisoner.

Lale, on the other hand, has vowed to himself that he’ll live to someday leave Birkenau, meaning that he believes he will have a future. In keeping with this, he makes Gita promise him that she’ll tell him about herself at some point before they leave the concentration camps, thereby subtly implying that they will indeed manage to obtain their freedom at some point. In turn, he gives Gita a sense of hope even when she’s hesitant to think about the future, ultimately using their budding relationship to help her remain optimistic about her chances of survival.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ Lale squeezes Dana’s hand. “Thank you. Try to get some food into her. I’ll have medicine tomorrow.”


He departs, his mind a whirlpool. *I barely know Gita, yet how can I live if she does not?*

That night, sleep evades him.

The next morning, Victor places medicine, along with food, into Lale’s bag.

That afternoon, he is able to get it to Dana.

Related Characters: Lale (speaker), Yuri, Victor, Gita, Dana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 83



Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears after Dana tells Lale that Gita has contracted typhus and that she’s on the verge of death. Hearing this, Lale immediately sets to work trying to obtain medicine from his new friends Victor and Yuri, eventually succeeding and relaying the medication to Dana so that she can administer it to Gita. While Lale waits to learn whether or not the medication has worked, he senses that he won’t be able to survive if Gita dies—and yet, he also recognizes that he hardly even knows Gita, since their relationship has just begun. For that matter, Gita hasn’t even told him anything about her life, since she wants to focus only on the present. All the same, it’s clear that meeting Gita has completely changed Lale’s life, effectively giving him even more of an incentive to stay alive in the concentration camps. Indeed, Lale’s love for Gita is a significant part of why he strives so hard to survive—this is why it would be so devastating to lose her. Simply put, love is one of the main aspects of life that helps Lale endure hardship. For this reason, then, he fears that he will lose all resolve to continue on in Birkenau if Gita were to die.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ Around her she can feel the recognition of those witnessing her moment of grief. They look on in silence, each going into their own dark place of despair, not knowing what has become of their own families. Slowly, the two groups of women—the longtimers and the newcomers—join together.

Related Characters: Mrs. Goldstein, Gita

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis



Gita has been a prisoner at Auschwitz-Birkenau for quite some time when she encounters Mrs. Goldstein, her former neighbor. Beside herself, Gita excitedly greets Mrs. Goldstein, who has just arrived in the camps. At first, Gita thinks that her old neighbor's presence in Birkenau might mean that her own family members have also arrived in the camp, but Mrs. Goldstein woefully informs Gita that this is not the case. In fact, she goes on to tell Gita that Gita's parents and sisters were taken and killed by the Nazis. Hearing this, Gita breaks down in despair, though she remains aware of the fact that everyone in the block is "witnessing her moment of grief." In this way, Gita feels the communal sorrow that pervades the concentration camps, since all of the prisoners are in similar situations, constantly wondering whether or not their families are safe. In this passage, Morris draws attention to the ways in which this shared sense of suffering becomes a point of unity, bringing both the seasoned prisoners and the newcomers together and enabling them to relate with one another, perhaps realizing that banding together in their suffering is the only thing that will lead to emotional resilience.

☹️ "But we have no future."

Lale holds her firmly around her waist, forces her to meet his gaze.

"Yes, we do. There will be a tomorrow for us. On the night I arrived here, I made a vow to myself that I would survive this hell. We will survive and make a life where we are free to kiss when we want to, make love when we want to."

Related Characters: Gita, Lale (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Lale tries once more to convince Gita to adopt an optimistic perspective, one that will make it easier for her to believe that they will both survive the concentration camps. After Lale tells Gita that he'll think she's beautiful no matter what she looks like in the future, Gita insists that they won't have a future together. In saying this, Gita is effectively trying to entrench herself in the present and to keep herself from getting her hopes up


about surviving Birkenau. Lale, however, remains steadfast in his convictions, telling Gita about the promise he made to himself to survive the concentration camps. Readers will remember that Lale made this vow to himself after witnessing a terrible and senseless act of violence on his first night as a prisoner. Given the circumstances of this vow, then, it's clear that Lale isn't one to become discouraged by hardship. Instead, he has no trouble embodying a sense of optimism even in the most demoralizing and frightening situations. What's more, Lale now has his relationship with Gita to further fuel his aspirations to survive. Because of this, he is uniquely capable of committing himself to the idea of the future, ultimately sweeping Gita up in his positivity and helping to lift her spirits.

☹️ "I'm sorry that I have my escape, my Lale. You know I wish with all my heart the same for you two."

"We are very happy that you have him," says Ivana.

"It is enough that one of us has a little happiness. We share in it, and you let us—that's enough for us," says Dana.

Related Characters: Ivana, Dana, Gita (speaker), Lale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 225



Explanation and Analysis

During this exchange, Gita acknowledges that she's lucky to have Lale in her life, since he gives her an "escape" from the horrors and sadness of everyday life in the concentration camps. Moreover, Gita tells Dana and Ivana that she wishes they had a similar kind of "escape," something that would alleviate their suffering. In response, they tell her that, in a way, they *do* have this: Gita herself is their "escape," since they can live vicariously through her, celebrating the simple fact that their close friend is actually happy despite their wretched circumstances. By saying this, Dana and Ivana imply that even the smallest amount of positivity and hope is enough to sustain multiple people in times of hardship. Although they don't have their own lovers to take their minds off of their sorrows, they share in Gita's contentment. In turn, readers see not only that positivity and love are contagious, but also that close friends are capable of sustaining each other in unexpected and beautiful ways.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ Their lovemaking is passionate, desperate. It is a need so long in the making that it cannot be denied. Two people desperate for the love and intimacy they fear they will otherwise never experience. It seals their commitment to each other, and Lale knows at this moment that he can love no other. It strengthens his resolve to go on another day, and another day, for a thousand days, for however long it takes for them to live by his words to Gita: “To be free to make love wherever, whenever we want to.”

Related Characters: Gita, Lale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Once Lale starts smuggling food into Auschwitz-Birkenau, he’s able to bribe Gita’s kapo into letting them spend time together in the block while the other female prisoners are still at work. As a result, they’re able to have sex for the first time, an experience that completely revitalizes them and makes them feel even more capable of withstanding hardship. In this regard, Lale and Gita’s physical intimacy “seals their commitment to each other,” strengthening the bond that already fuels their desire to survive. What’s more, having sex with Gita “strengthens [Lale’s] resolve to go on another day, and another day”—an important notion, since this proves that love is capable of fortifying people against nearly anything. By having sex and further bonding with each other, both Lale and Gita recommit themselves to their efforts to survive, using their affection as a reason to stay positive about their futures.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ “What do you mean, hero? She’s not a hero,” Gita says with some annoyance. “She just wants to live.”

“And that makes her a hero. You’re a hero, too, my darling. That the two of you have chosen to survive is a type of resistance to these Nazi bastards. Choosing to live is an act of defiance, a form of heroism.”

Related Characters: Lale, Gita (speaker), Schwarzhuber, Cilka

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 156



Explanation and Analysis


This exchange takes place between Gita and Lale after Gita finally tells Lale that Schwarzhuber—one of the camp’s highest-ranking officers—has been periodically raping Cilka. When Lale hears this, he calls Cilka a hero for enduring such a terrible fate, but Gita doesn’t understand what Lale means by this. Pointing out that Cilka is just doing what’s necessary to stay alive, Gita insists that her friend isn’t a hero. However, Lale disagrees because he believes that anyone who chooses to do what it takes to survive in the twisted world of the concentration camps is a hero. In turn, he suggests that it’s admirable to devote oneself to survival because doing so requires quite a bit of courage, since it would be easier to simply give up and resign oneself to death. In all likelihood, Lale says this because he wants to strengthen Gita’s resolve, hoping that they’ll both have the strength to continue striving toward their future together without becoming demoralized by the horrific conditions they’re forced to face as prisoners.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ How has he done it? How is he still breathing, when so many aren’t? He thinks back to the vow he made at the beginning. To survive and to see those responsible pay. Maybe, just maybe, those in the plane had understood what was going on, and rescue was on the way. It would be too late for those who died today, but maybe their deaths would not be entirely in vain. *Hold that thought. Use it to get out of bed tomorrow morning, and the next morning, and the next.*

Related Characters: Lale

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

One day, a U.S. Airforce plane flies over Auschwitz-Birkenau, causing commotion on the ground as prisoners run around trying to get the pilot’s attention. Lale watches from afar as prisoners try to direct the plane toward one of the crematoriums, hoping that U.S. forces will soon descend upon the Nazis. However, the plane flies away, at which point Nazis standing in watchtowers open fire on the prisoners. In the aftermath of this deeply disturbing event, Lale thinks about how far he’s come and he wonders how he’s managed to survive for so long. Moreover, he reminds

himself of his vow to stay alive long enough to see the Nazis pay for what they've done. Once again, then, readers see that Lale responds to adversity by embodying hope and optimism, this time choosing to believe that the prisoners who died that day did not die in vain. With this in mind, Lale tells himself that perhaps the prisoners who pointed out the crematorium helped spread news about the Nazis' cruelty even if the plane didn't stop. And though it would certainly be easier for Lale to break down in despair, he decides to cling to this hopeful idea, allowing it to fuel his efforts to survive.

Chapter 19 Quotes

“Have you lost your faith?” Gita asks as she leans back into Lale's chest [...].

“Why do you ask?” he says, stroking the back of her head.

“Because I think you have,” she says, “and that saddens me.”

“Then clearly you haven't lost yours?”

“I asked first.”

“Yes, I think I have,” Lale answers.



“When?”

“The first night I arrived here. I told you what happened, what I saw. How any merciful god could let that happen, I don't know. And nothing has happened since that night to change my mind. Quite the opposite.”

“You have to believe in something.”

“I do. I believe in you and me, and getting out of here, and making a life together where we can—” [...]

Related Characters: Gita, Lale (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

In this dialogue, Gita asks Lale if he has lost his religious faith, and he tells her that he has. Although Lale remains positive and he believes that he and Gita will survive the concentration camps, he can't wrap his head around the idea that a god would ever allow something like the Holocaust to happen. Hearing this, Gita expresses her sadness about the fact that Lale doesn't believe in anything, but he quickly corrects her, saying that he *does* believe in something: love. More specifically, he believes in *their* love, devoting himself to their relationship and finding that it

gives him faith in the goodness of life. In other words, in the absence of religious belief, Lale turns to human connection and intimacy, choosing to focus on the beauty that exists between him and Gita. In turn, Lale is capable of withstanding trauma, effectively embodying the same kind of hopefulness and resilience that most people draw from religion. Once again, readers see the sustaining qualities of romance, which is largely responsible for Lale's ability to stave off hopelessness in times of duress.

“The thing is,” Jakub says, “I can't let you give me any names.”



Lale stares, confused.

“You were kind to me and I will make the beating look worse than it is, but I will kill you before I let you tell me a name. I want as little innocent blood on my hands as possible,” Jakub explains.

“Oh, Jakub. I never imagined this would be the work they found for you. I'm so sorry.”

“If I must kill one Jew to save ten others, then I will.”

Related Characters: Lale, Jakub (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

When the Nazis discover that Lale has been storing jewels and money under his mattress and using them as payment for extra food, they bring him to Block 11 to be tortured. Upon arriving, Lale is surprised to find his friend Jakub, whom Lale went out of his way to help on Jakub's first night in Birkenau. Now, though, Lale learns that Jakub has been instructed to torture him until he confesses the names of the prisoners who have been helping him smuggle food into the camp. However, Jakub tells Lale that, though he'll try spare Lale, he's prepared to kill him before letting him give up the names of the other prisoners. This is because Jakub wants “as little innocent bloods on [his] hands as possible.” Of course, Lale understands this logic, since he, too, knows what it's like to be forced to do a job that involves harming fellow prisoners.



Although Lale's position as the tattooist has less serious implications than Jakub's job as the torturer, Lale is nevertheless troubled by the harm he causes others. Ultimately, he makes peace with his work by trying to be as gentle as possible while marking new arrivals. Similarly,

Jakub goes out of his way to minimize the amount of “innocent blood” spilled by the Nazis. To that end, he tells Lale that he will “kill one Jew to save ten others,” thereby announcing his desire to do whatever he can to protect his fellow prisoners, even if this means doing something he would otherwise never do (namely, killing another human being). In this moment, then, readers are faced with the uncomfortable idea that sometimes people have to make changes to their conception of morality in order to do the least amount of harm possible.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☛ The men in Lale’s block also tell him of rumors about a general uprising, which they wanted to join but didn’t believe it was meant to happen on this day. They have heard that the Russians are advancing, and the uprising was planned to coincide with their arrival, to assist them in liberating the camp. Lale admonishes himself for not having made friends with his block companions sooner. Not having this knowledge nearly got Gita killed.

Related Characters: Gita, Lale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

One day, Lale is surprised to hear explosions coming from one of the crematoriums. When he rushes outside, he sees that the Sonderkommando have somehow obtained guns and they’re shooting at the Nazis while makeshift bombs explode in the crematoriums. Frightened, Lale finds Gita and he holds her close until everything has died down, telling her to listen when the Nazis order the prisoners to return to their blocks. That night, Lale talks to the new Hungarian prisoners in his own block for the first time and he learns that there have been rumors circulating about an insurgency. What’s more, Lale’s blockmates tell him that the Russian Army is getting closer and closer to the camp.

This is an important moment in the novel because it not only signals the beginning of the end of the Nazi regime, but it also shows that Lale has accidentally overlooked the value of communal support—the very thing that he has more or less devoted himself to throughout his time in Birkenau. Now, though, he realizes that he hasn’t made enough of an effort to talk to his blockmates, especially since doing so would have alerted him to news of the Sonderkommando’s insurrection. More importantly, his ignorance regarding these events could have led to Gita’s death, since she could

have been caught in the crossfire between the Nazis and the Sonderkommando. Yet again, then, knowledge emerges as one of the most valuable commodities in the concentration camps.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☛ He starts to talk occasionally to one of them. The guard is impressed that Lale speaks fluent German. He has heard about Auschwitz and Birkenau but has not been there, and wants to hear about it. Lale paints a picture removed from reality. Nothing can be gained by telling this German the true nature of the treatment of prisoners there. He tells him what he did there and how he much preferred to work than to sit around. A few days later, the guard asks him if he’d like to move to a subcamp of Mauthausen, at Saurer-Werke in Vienna. Thinking it cannot be any worse than here, and with assurances from the guard that conditions are slightly better and the commandant is too old to care, Lale accepts the offer. The guard points out that this camp does not take Jews, so he should keep quiet about his religion.

Related Characters: Lale

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 222



Explanation and Analysis

After the Nazis empty Auschwitz-Birkenau of prisoners, Lale is taken to another camp in Vienna. At this new camp, he and his fellow prisoners aren’t put to work. Instead, they find themselves sitting around with nothing to do. Always the type to capitalize on any chance to improve his situation, Lale takes this opportunity to observe the guards, eventually developing a rapport with the most approachable one. It’s noteworthy that Lale develops a relationship with this man by impressing him with his fluency in German, once more demonstrating that knowledge is a powerful tool for people who have otherwise been completely stripped of all power or influence. In alignment with this, Lale manages to win this guard over, endearing himself so thoroughly to him that the Nazi even goes out of his way to help Lale, offering to transfer him to a safer camp. What’s more, the guard isn’t simply trying to help Lale, but also breaking the rules by doing him this favor, since the camp in question doesn’t accept Jewish prisoners. In turn, readers see just how skillful Lale is at building relationships with people who are completely different than him—relationships that ultimately benefit him and that ensure his safety.

Chapter 28 Quotes

●● He feels profound grief for his scattered family. At the same time, he longs for Gita, and this gives him the sense of purpose he needs to carry on. He must find her. He has promised.

Related Characters: Goldie, Gita, Lale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

When Lale finally finds freedom, he returns to his home in Krompachy, Slovakia, where he reunites with his sister, Goldie. Although this is a happy moment, Goldie tells him that their older brother died fighting for the resistance and

that their parents were taken by the Nazis just days after Lale himself went to Auschwitz-Birkenau. As is common in such cases, nobody knows where Lale's parents are now. Upon learning this news, though, Lale decides—at the behest of Goldie—to go looking for Gita. As he does this, he finds himself torn between sadness for his family and hopefulness regarding his search for Gita. Unsurprisingly, it appears as if his hopefulness wins out over his sorrow, ultimately giving him “the sense of purpose he needs to carry on.” Accordingly, readers see once more that Lale is motivated first and foremost by hope, faith, and love, not by sorrow or pain. Even after everything Lale has been through, he remains positive, focusing not on what he has lost, but what he has yet to gain—a mindset that helped him survive the concentration camps and that now continues to propel him forward.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Lale sets to work tattooing fellow prisoners, inking identification numbers onto their forearms. As he presses the wooden needle into a woman's arm, he notices that she doesn't even flinch. This, he knows, is because she's learned not to react. Beside Lale, his mentor, Pepan, tells him to hurry. Looking down the line of prisoners, though, Lale sees an officer in a white coat walking toward him, inspecting prisoners as he goes. When the man reaches the woman Lale is tattooing, he takes her face in his hands and he turns it about. Lale senses that the woman is about to say something to this mysterious officer, so Lale squeezes her arm and he nonverbally communicates that she should keep quiet. Heeding his advice, the woman says nothing, and the officer eventually moves on.

This early snapshot of Lale's job as the tattooist of Auschwitz cues readers into the complexity of his role. Although Morris hasn't yet clarified the circumstances surrounding Lale's position, the scene—in combination with the novel's title—makes clear that Lale inks identification numbers onto prisoners at Auschwitz, a concentration camp widely considered the worst and most deadly in the entire Holocaust. As the tattooist, Lale is forced to scar his fellow prisoners against their will, but it becomes evident in this scene that he also finds himself in a unique position to help them. For instance, when the officer in the white coat inspects the woman getting a tattoo, Lale secretly warns her against saying anything, thereby saving her from further scrutiny. In this way, Morris intimates that, though Lale does the Nazis' bidding as the tattooist, this means that he's often able to help others—an indication that morality isn't all that straightforward in the twisted world of the concentration camps.



"Well done," Lale whispers to the woman, putting the finishing touches on her number: 4562. He looks up into the woman's eyes and he gives her a faint smile, which she returns. Seeing this, Lale suddenly feels as if his heart is going to explode so he looks away. When he turns back again, the woman is gone.

Lale's rush of feeling for this woman is worth noting because it suggests that, although Lale is trying desperately to survive harrowing circumstances, he's still capable of experiencing positive emotions. To that end, his attraction to prisoner 4562 implies that he is the kind of person who invests himself in love and hope even in the face of extreme adversity—a mentality that just might contribute to his ability to withstand otherwise unbearable conditions.



CHAPTER 1

It is April, 1942. Lale stands inside a crowded cattle car, which is part of a German train taking mass numbers of Jewish men to an unknown destination. The men standing around Lale sneer at his appearance, thinking he's rich because he's wearing a suit. They tell him that his upper-class lifestyle has clearly gotten him nowhere, since he's in the same predicament as everyone else. In response, Lale only smiles at them, not wanting to cause a disturbance. In fact, when people speak to him, he replies with encouraging words, hoping to lift the overall spirit in the cattle car. They have been riding like this for two days, and Lale can already feel how different—which is to say, worse—he feels.

Jumping back in time from the prologue, Morris narrates Lale's path to Auschwitz. What's most notable about this scene isn't just that Lale and the other passengers are forced to endure terrible travel conditions, but that they don't know where they're going. By keeping the prisoners in a state of uncertainty, then, the Nazis have put them in a place of extreme vulnerability. To alleviate this, Lale tries to be optimistic, perhaps realizing that helping his fellow passengers stay positive is the only way to embody resilience, even if that resilience is only an attitude.



Next to Lale stands a young man who asks Lale how he has managed to stay so calm. He also asks where Lale thinks they're being taken, but Lale simply responds by reminding the young man that, regardless of where they're headed, they're all there to make sure their families remain safe at home. When the other man, who introduces himself as Aron, says, "But what if—?" Lale tells him not to think in hypotheticals, instead urging him to follow whatever orders they receive. However, Aron suggests that they should try to fight the Nazis whenever they reach their destination, since the Jewish men outnumber the officers. Hearing this, Lale reminds Aron that the officers have guns and will be impossible for the men to defeat with mere fists, so Aron drops this idea.

Lale and the others have been told they'll be working for the Germans. Although some men resent Lale because he wears a suit, others look to him as an authority of sorts, asking him questions even though he has no extra information about what's going to happen. All Lale knows is that he's glad to have found a place to stand near one of the slatted walls of the cattle car, where he's able to look out at the European countryside as it scrolls by. Behind Lale, men fight to get away from the buckets that have begun to overflow with feces, and this makes Lale all the more grateful that he can peer out into the fresh air and look at fields of flowers. He vows to himself that the next flower he gives to a woman, he will pick himself.

Behind Lale, two men fight to get away from the overflowing buckets, and one of them is killed in the scuffle. "You killed him," Lale hears someone say. "Lucky bastard," someone else adds, but Lale disagrees with this sentiment, thinking that the man who died is unfortunate—after all, Lale knows that his own life is still too good to come to an end in such a wretched place. As the journey continues, the train makes frequent stops that sometimes last a long time. During one of these stops, a group of men in Lale's car decides to revolt, smashing the walls in the hopes of breaking them down. When one man tells Lale to help or get out of the way, Lale calmly advises the man to reserve his energy, pointing out that if the walls could be broken down, cows would have already destroyed them. Considering this, the men dejectedly stand down.

When Lale says that he has given himself up to the Nazis to ensure the safety of his family, readers see his willingness to sacrifice himself for his loved ones. Above all, Lale wants to do what he can to protect the people he's closest to, even if this means putting himself in danger. Furthermore, he discourages Aron from thinking in hypotheticals, instead believing that they must simply focus on what they know, not what might happen. In turn, it becomes clear that one of the hardest things about Lale's predicament is that it is shot through with uncertainty, which is emotionally torturous in and of itself.



In this passage, it becomes clear that Lale is the kind of person who supports others, the sort of man whom people look to for help and guidance. Additionally, readers see Lale's overwhelming sense of optimism, as he focuses on the idea of someday picking flowers for women, thereby implying that he believes he will survive whatever the Nazis have in store for him.



When Lale feels sorry for the man who died in the cattle car, he demonstrates his overall sense of optimism, since he still believes that his own life is too good to lose even though he's currently facing rather devastating conditions. This means that he isn't the kind of person to give up hope, instead investing himself not only in the act of survival, but in the idea that life is precious and worth living regardless of the circumstances.



Upon hearing that Germans were entering small towns in his home country of Slovakia and taking away Jewish people to work for them, Lale moved back in with his parents in Krompachy. He stayed there for four weeks before the Germans announced that every Jewish family was required to furnish the German government with one child of 18 years or older to become workers. Although Lale has an older brother, he volunteered to go because his brother has a wife and child. Not knowing what kind of work they would assign him, Lale dressed in his best clothing and he hoped that he'd be given a posting in which he could use his knowledge of foreign languages. He then reported to a governmental building in Krompachy, where men he once went to school with told him to go to Prague to receive his next orders.

Two days pass before the train reaches its final destination. Hearing officers screaming in German and the sound of vicious dogs barking, Lale gets off the cattle car. An officer instructs everyone to leave their belongings on the ground, but before Lale does this, he mutters a short prayer for the man who died in the fight to get away from the overflowing buckets. Afterward, he looks around at the total chaos surrounding him outside the train, watching as SS officers rip possessions from people's hands and hit them with the butts of their rifles. One officer fires a gunshot into the air and he screams, at which point Lale gives up his suitcase. He's sorry to part with the books his mother packed for him since he's sure he'll never see them again.

Lale and the others are forced toward a brick building, walking beneath an archway that reads "ARBEIT MACHT FREI"—*work will set you free*. Lale finds this mention of freedom absurd and he wonders what kind of work he'll be doing. Before he can consider this further, though, Aron sidles up to Lale and he asks where they are. Lale speculates that they've reached "the end of the line." Seeing Aron's fear, Lale tells the young man that he'll be all right as long as he follows orders. Lale then reminds himself to do the same.

Again, Lale's optimism is at the forefront of the novel, as he hopes that the job he'll be given by the Nazis will require him to wear a suit—a rather unrealistic expectation. However, this just goes to show that Lale has no idea what the Nazis have in store for him, ultimately underscoring the extent to which the Nazis keep everyone in a state of uncertainty as a way of more effectively manipulating them and consolidating power. In turn, it becomes clear that knowledge often translates to power and, conversely, that a lack of knowledge can make people especially vulnerable.



It's notable that Lale stops to say a prayer for the man who died in the cattle car, since this indicates that he's still committed to his religious faith. As the novel progresses, this is a worthwhile moment to keep in mind, since Lale's relationship with religion slowly begins to change as he sees more and more horror and he has to seek out alternative forms of faith and hope.



Although Lale recognizes the twisted irony of the idea that working in a concentration camp will set him "free," he also recognizes that following orders is currently his only means of survival. With this in mind, Lale tries to comfort Aron by suggesting that obeying the Nazis will keep them safe. Moreover, this mentality is important to note, since Lale's commitment to following instructions is later put to the test when the Nazis give him jobs that challenge his moral compass.



An SS officer introduces himself as Commandant Rudolf Hoess, addressing Lale and his fellow prisoners and telling them that he's in charge of this camp. "Welcome to Auschwitz," he says, instructing everyone to focus on work and saying that there won't be trouble if they obey orders. Going on, Hoess says that they will now be "processed" and then taken to where they'll be living, a place called Auschwitz Two-Birkenau. When he walks away, the prisoners are put into lines, where they wait to receive identification numbers. The numbers are then written on a piece of paper that the prisoners are instructed to hand to the tattooist, who tattoos the number onto their forearms. Beside himself, Lale watches as the number 32407 is scarred into his skin. Feeling the pain, he wonders how somebody could ever do such a thing to another human being.

Lale and the others are instructed to remove their clothes and enter a large shower. The officers also tell them to leave their clothes on the floor, saying that they'll be there when the prisoners return. Lale does what he's told but knows he'll never see his suit again. As he undresses, he finds a book of matches in his pocket. After making sure there are no guards watching, he strikes the match and puts it beneath his pile of clothes on the floor. Hurrying toward the shower, he hears commotion behind him as the officers yell about the small fire he's created. This decision to ignite his clothes, he realizes, was perhaps the last instance of free will he'll ever be able to exercise. But as Lale gets into the shower, he suddenly regrets what he's done, fearing that someone may have seen him.

After showering, Lale and the other prisoners return to find that their clothes have been replaced by old Russian military uniforms and combat boots. Before they're allowed to dress, though, they're forced to line up to get their heads shaved. Afterward, Lale tries to find the best fitting uniform and boots and he's then pushed outside with everyone else. Walking through the rain, Lale tilts his head up and he desperately drinks the rainwater falling into his mouth. Eventually, the group reaches Birkenau, which looks similar to Auschwitz. Aron comes up to Lale, who tells him that he looks awful. "You haven't seen yourself," Aron says. "Consider me a mirror."

In this moment, Commandant Rudolf Hoess attempts to lend credence to the idea that following orders will keep the prisoners safe. This is the same idea to which Lale has committed himself, meaning that he must align himself with the Nazis in order to survive. As soon as Lale commits himself to doing this, though, he comes face to face with a real-life embodiment of this worldview, as the camp's tattooist scars him for life on behalf of the Nazis. Right away, then, Lale sees that it might not be as easy as it seems to unthinkingly follow orders, since doing so might mean hurting other people.



Again, Lale realizes that it won't be all that easy to simply follow the Nazis' orders. After all, he has already committed an act of defiance even though he told Aron to follow instructions. Consequently, readers see just how difficult it is for people to follow rules that blatantly defy their own humanity, even when they know that their lives depend upon their ability to obey the rules.



Although Lale's surrounding circumstances are dismal and threatening, he still manages to forge a relationship with Aron. As the two men joke with each other, they form a bond that clearly helps them cope with their otherwise terrifying situation. Accordingly, then, camaraderie and fellowship emerge as important forms of resilience and support.



Lale and Aron are placed in Block 7, a building full of bunks and men who have already laid claim to the beds. Lale and Aron search for space but discover that they won't be able to secure their own mattress, since each one accommodates between two and four men. Consequently, they settle into a bed where two prisoners are already lying, and they listen as someone calls out for food. In response, the SS officer in charge says that the prisoners will be fed in the morning, to which someone says, "We'll all be dead from starvation by morning." Hearing this, someone else adds, "And at peace." Joining the conversation, yet another prisoner jokes that, because the mattresses are made of hay, they should all continue to act like cattle and eat their own beds. "Mooooooooo..." someone says, and everyone laughs in the darkness.

Late that night, Lale gets up to pee. Making his way outside, he sees a ditch intended to be used as a bathroom. Above this ditch sit three prisoners who are defecating while quietly conversing. Before getting too close, Lale pauses because he sees two SS officers approaching. Staying hidden, he watches as the officers notice the three prisoners at the latrine, draw their rifles, and shoot the unsuspecting men before carelessly walking away. Breathless, Lale steps into the shadows as the officers walk by him and he makes an oath to himself: "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." When Lale returns, Aron asks what the shots were, but Lale claims he didn't see. He then tells Aron to wait until morning to urinate.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, the prisoners are shunted outside to receive orders. As an SS officer speaks, the prisoners go quiet, knowing better than to point out that many of them can't understand German. Lale, for his part, speaks perfect German and so he translates the instructions when the guard is finished, relaying that they will receive two meals a day—one in the morning and one in the evening (if, that is, they survive until evening). During the days, the prisoners will work to continue building the facilities at Birkenau. The officer explains that all prisoners must follow the orders of their kapo. After listening to these instructions, the prisoners line up for breakfast while their kapo introduces himself, presenting himself as harsh and watchful.

In the same way that Lale and Aron turn to each other for support, the prisoners in their block come together, setting forth a kind of gallows humor that ultimately helps them process their terrible circumstances. Of course, their jokes about being treated like cows do nothing to actually alleviate their physical suffering, but these jokes do at least manage to make them feel unified in their misery. In turn, they address their emotional suffering by unifying with one another, proving the sustaining qualities of human connection.



When Lale sees the officers needlessly kill the three men at the latrine, he witnesses senseless and merciless violence for the first time in his life. Instead of letting this completely discourage him, though, he responds to this traumatic event by making a vow to himself that he'll survive his imprisonment. In turn, it's evident that Lale reacts to adversity by committing himself to hope, refusing to let devastating circumstances interfere with his will to live and survive. What's more, the fact that he doesn't tell Aron what actually happened demonstrates his determination to help his friend stay positive, which further showcases Lale's commitment to emotionally supporting his fellow prisoners.



Lale's linguistic skills put him in a position to help the other prisoners in his block, as he makes sure everyone understands their orders—a crucial aspect of survival. This aligns with his overall role as somebody whom others turn to for support. By this point in the novel, it's clear that Lale is an empathetic and caring man, the kind of person who will go out of his way to help others when he's able to do so. What's more, it once more becomes evident that knowledge can serve as a form of power, since Lale's grasp of German makes it possible for him to increase the likelihood that his fellow prisoners will survive by following the correct instructions.



Lale receives a cup of weak liquid and pinches his nose to swallow, afraid he might throw up. Aron notes that he received a piece of potato in his portion and he asks how Lale's cup tasted. "Best meal I've had in ages," Lale jokes, and when Aron asks if he's always so chipper, Lale tells him to ask again at day's end. As if on cue, their kapo screams at the group, calling them "lazy bastards" and telling them to finish eating because there's work to be done. Lale is assigned to work on the roof of a partially-constructed building. When he climbs up a ladder, he encounters two Russian men. Lale tries to introduce himself to the men, but they tell him that they'll talk later. Before falling silent, though, the men express their surprise that Lale can speak Russian—yet another one of the languages he has at his disposal.

During a break, Lale starts to climb down the ladder when one of his Russian companions tells him to stay put, explaining that it's safer to remain on the roof where the kapo or guards can't bother him. The Russian man then explains that he and his friend were captured for being enemy soldiers. He notes that some SS officers have been bragging that Auschwitz-Birkenau will be the biggest concentration camp to exist, and Lale shudders to think about what kind of building he's helping construct. He then asks his new Russian friends about the different insignias that prisoners wear on their clothes—there are people with green triangles, red triangles, black triangles, and yellow stars. The green triangles, the Russian men explain, are the most vicious since they have been put in the camp because they're criminals. One of the Russian men adds that rapists and killers excel in Auschwitz.

Lale learns from the Russian men that the prisoners wearing red stars have been put in the camps because of their anti-Nazi political beliefs. The prisoners with black stars are simply "lazy bastards" who tend not to survive, and the people wearing yellow stars are—as Lale knows from his own star—Jewish. Finally, former Russian soldiers have no insignia at all, simply wearing their military uniforms like the rest of the prisoners.

That night, Lale comes upon some of his fellow prisoners as they pray in Block 7, but he doesn't join them. In the coming days, he listens to the SS officers as they speak German, picking up whatever information he can. This is valuable, especially since they assume Lale can't understand what they're saying. In this way, Lale feels as if he's gaining the only kind of "ammunition" he's capable of obtaining: knowledge. He also notices that there are a group of workers each day who don't wear uniforms, instead dressing in civilian clothes. Furthermore, he wonders how he could get a job like his kapo, who never seems to do anything but walk around and who's never forced by the SS officers to work.

Again, Lale demonstrates his seemingly unflinching sense of optimism, once more joking with Aron instead of becoming disenchanted about his situation. Furthermore, Lale's knowledge of Russian allows him to converse with his fellow workers on the roof, thereby putting him in an advantageous position because he'll be able to learn the tricks of the trade from them—a very valuable thing, since working well will help Lale stay out of trouble with the SS. Accordingly, it becomes clear yet again that knowledge is a powerful tool.



Once more, Lale's linguistic skills prove indispensable to his survival, as he finds himself capable of picking up helpful tips from the Russian roofers. Moreover, he gains valuable insight into the hierarchies that exist in the camp, effectively learning the ins and outs of the social landscape in a way that will help him avoid trouble. In this way, he learns that the most wretched and vicious people tend to excel in this terrible environment. This, in turn, suggests that standard conceptions of morality become completely distorted in the camps, making it difficult for people to adhere to a straightforward moral compass.



Lale's ability to speak Russian continues to benefit him as he learns more and more about the power structures and social hierarchies at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is this ability to gain information, it seems, that will be most helpful to Lale's struggle to survive an otherwise unnavigable environment.



That Lale decides not to pray with his fellow prisoners is worth noting, since he recently prayed for the man who lost his life in the cattle car. This suggests that Lale has already begun to lose touch with his religious faith, most likely after witnessing the senseless murder of the three prisoners at the latrine. Instead of focusing on religion, though, Lale sets himself to the task of gathering whatever information he can about the camp, treating knowledge like "ammunition" that he'll be able to use in the future.



Wanting to find a way to minimize the amount of physical labor he's forced to do, Lale tries to impress his kapo one day by yelling at his fellow workers, urging them to toil faster because there's so much to do. Hearing this, Lale's kapo calls him over and asks him in Polish—another language Lale speaks—if he enjoys working as a roofer. In response, Lale says he'll do anything he's told to do, and then the kapo offers him a job as his assistant, saying that he needs somebody to fetch him things and generally do whatever he says. If Lale does this well, the kapo says, he will enjoy an easier time in the camp. If he lets the kapo down, though, he will suffer. Lale accepts the offer, though he wonders as he stands next to the kapo if he has made "a deal with the devil."

One day, Lale sees a truck full of prisoners pull up next to a strange converted bus. Following it to see what's happening, he watches as Nazis force a large group of naked prisoners from the truck. The officers push the prisoners into the bus until the vehicle is completely packed, at which point they close the doors and they check to make sure everything has been securely locked. An officer then climbs to the top of the bus, opens a hatch in the roof, and drops a cannister inside before closing it again. Immediately, the bus fills with chemicals and it begins to shake; Lale hears screams coming from within. Unable to stand, Lale falls to his knees and he vomits as the bus finally goes quiet. When the officers open the doors, piles of dead bodies fall out, and Lale faints.

Upon waking up, Lale hobbles back to Block 7 but he's unable to get up the next morning because his body has been overtaken by a fever. He doesn't come back to full consciousness until seven days later, when he wakes up to an old man pouring water into his mouth. This man helps Lale up and he takes him outside to get some air, explaining that his name is Pepan and that he is the *Tätowierer* who tattoos the identification numbers on new prisoners' arms. When Pepan asks what Lale thinks of his work, Lale jokes that the number he received wouldn't have been his first choice of a tattoo. Pepan assumes that Lale would rather have had a woman's name, so he asks the name of Lale's "sweetheart." Lale simply replies, "I don't know. We haven't met yet."

It's worth noting that Lale's attempt to alleviate his workload requires him to yell at his fellow prisoners. Of course, this has no tangibly negative effect on the other prisoners' lives, since simply yelling at them won't harm them. At the same time, though, Lale's inclination to shout at them suggests that he might be willing to go against his fellow prisoners in order to make his own experience easier. However, this is not to say that Lale would actively harm anyone, since he has already proved that he is the kind of person who wants to help others. And yet, he has perhaps recognized that in order to move up in the camp, it is necessary to make "a deal with the devil."



This is the second gruesome act of violence that Lale witnesses in Birkenau. Unlike the first time, though, seeing such horror doesn't reaffirm Lale's commitment to survive—it completely overwhelms him. In turn, readers see that humans can only handle so much trauma and that even somebody as emotionally resilient as Lale is incapable of standing strong in the face of such terror and evil.



Although Lale doesn't yet know exactly what happened to him, it's rather clear that he has been ill, though his fragility is also coupled with the fact that he witnessed a terrible thing when the Nazis killed a busload of prisoners. Thankfully, it appears that this man named Pepan has gone out of his way to help Lale, proving the indispensable value of communal support—especially in a place like Birkenau, where everyone is in constant danger of dying.



Pepan tells Lale that he was walking by Block 7 the previous week when he saw a young man pleading with an SS officer not to put Lale on a “cart for the dead and dying.” The officer refused, but when he turned away, this young man pulled Lale off the cart, at which point Pepan rushed over to help. Since then, Pepan and the men in Block 7 have cared for Lale, who was suffering from typhus. During the nights, Lale’s bunkmates looked after him, and Pepan stayed with him when he could during the days. When Lale tries to thank him, Pepan says that the person he should really thank is the man who pulled Lale off the cart, though Pepan doesn’t know the man’s name.

Lale asks about Pepan’s background, noticing that he wears a red star. Pepan tells him that he’s an academic from Paris who was rounded up by the Nazis for expressing anti-German sentiments. When Lale asks if Pepan will continue to teach such things when he returns to his normal life, Pepan laughs at Lale’s optimism. He then asks Lale if his character is as strong as his physical makeup, and Lale assures him that he’s a “survivor,” though Pepan points out that sometimes certain strengths can become weaknesses in the concentration camps. “Charm and an easy smile will get you in trouble,” he says.

Pepan goes on to offer Lale a job as his assistant, a posting he says will make it easier to survive. At first, Lale is hesitant to accept because he doesn’t think he can tattoo unwilling prisoners, but Pepan notes that somebody else will fill the position if Lale doesn’t. What’s more, somebody who has less “soul” than Lale might accept the job and tattoo people in a way that hurts them even more. Thinking this over, Lale accepts the job offer. Before Pepan leaves, though, Lale asks him why he wants him as an assistant. In response, Pepan says that he can tell Lale must be an extraordinary person, since Pepan saw another prisoner risk his own life to save Lale.

As Lale learns more about what happened to him after he fainted, it becomes increasingly clear that Pepan wasn’t the only person who went out of his way to help him. In fact, Lale owes his life to the man who pulled him off the death cart, effectively risking his own wellbeing in order to save Lale. This, it seems, is the kind of communal support that makes it possible for prisoners to survive such harsh conditions.



Pepan’s advice to Lale is important, since he points out that the things that made Lale successful outside the camps could actually work against him as a prisoner. Once again, then, Lale picks up valuable information, learning from an experienced prisoner like Pepan and thereby gaining a better sense of how he should behave in order to survive.



Lale’s reservations about tattooing other prisoners conflict with his previous resolution to maximize his chances of surviving by following orders. Of course, nobody has ordered him to become Pepan’s assistant, but if he accepts he will be working on behalf of the Nazis to permanently mark his fellow prisoners—an idea that weighs heavily on his conscience. At the same time, though, Pepan indicates not only that accepting this job will increase Lale’s chances of survival, but also that somebody who cares less about other people might take the position if Lale refuses it. In other words, Pepan proposes a new framework, one that encourages Lale to alter the way he thinks of morality, since his circumstances clearly call for a different approach.



Back in Block 7, Lale discovers that Aron is gone. Lale's bunkmates tell him that the kapo took Aron away: the kapo was looking for Lale but he couldn't find him, and Aron didn't want to tell the kapo that Lale was sick because he knew doing so would mean the end for Lale. Accordingly, Aron told the kapo that Lale had already died, but this irked the kapo, who took Aron instead. Hearing this, Lale begins to weep as his bunkmates explain that they kept caring for him after Aron was taken away, wanting to finish what Aron started. They were, they say, inspired by Aron's desire to save "the one"—a phrase Lale recognizes. He completes the rest of the saying: "To save one is to save the world." Turning to these men, Lale thanks them with all his heart and he hopes he can someday repay them, though he senses that he won't be able to.

The next morning, Pepan takes Lale back to the building where new prisoners are processed. Seeing the chaos there, Lale realizes that he is now helping the Nazis defile his fellow prisoners, but he doesn't have time to think about this because Pepan introduces him to an SS officer, Oberscharführer Houstek, who is their boss. Houstek comes up to Lale and he studies him, asking what languages he speaks. "Slovak, German, Russian, French, Hungarian, and a little Polish," Lale replies. With a grunt, Houstek walks away and Lale jokingly whispers to Pepan that he must have gotten the job. Viciously, Pepan whirls around and he stares at Lale, telling him not to underestimate Houstek. "Lose your bravado, or you will lose your life," he says, instructing Lale to not look above Houstek's boots the next time he encounters him.

CHAPTER 3

That night, Lale dreams that he's back in the department store where he used to work, flirting with a young woman who has come to buy perfume. A naturally extroverted person, Lale always enjoys meeting new people, but he especially enjoys meeting women. Suddenly, though, he's roused by the sound of a gunshot and he realizes once again that he's in a concentration camp. Later that day, Lale learns that he and Pepan will be tattooing female prisoners whose tattoos have faded. Lale hates the idea of this, finding it particularly abhorrent to scar women, whom he respects and appreciates so deeply. Soon enough, though, Pepan reminds him that he has no choice, so he sets to work.

Again, Lale learns that the only reason he's alive is because of his fellow prisoners. In particular, Aron risked—and ultimately sacrificed—his own life in order to help Lale, calling upon the Judaic belief that "to save one is to save the world." This idea suggests that it's always worthwhile to save another person, since if everyone went out of their way to save just one individual, the entire world would benefit from their efforts. With this in mind, Aron willingly put himself in danger. More importantly, though, his actions inspired Lale's other bunkmates, who continued to care for Lale even after Aron gave his life. This, in turn, is a sign that kindness and empathy tend to perpetuate themselves.



When Houstek agrees to let Lale work as Pepan's assistant, it is seemingly because he's impressed by Lale's language skills (though he does little to express this sentiment). Once more, then, Lale's knowledge gives him more power than he would otherwise have. Still, though, Pepan reminds Lale that he should never forget that he's in danger and that a single miscalculation when interacting with an SS officer could lead to death.



Once more, Lale's experience in the concentration camps tests the limits of what he's willing to do in order to survive. Although he has gotten used to the idea of tattooing fellow prisoners, the thought of tattooing women upsets him even more. However, Lale recognizes that he has no choice but to follow orders, especially now that he has agreed to be the assistant tattooist. Accordingly, he tries to set aside his reservations—a necessary thing to do if he wants to keep himself safe.



While tattooing a woman, Lale notices a man in a white coat walking down the line of prisoners and inspecting them. When the man reaches the woman Lale is tattooing, he takes her face in his hands. Lale can sense that the woman is about to say something so he squeezes her arm to secretly indicate that she should remain silent. She follows Lale's advice, and the man in white soon leaves her alone. "Well done," Lale whispers as he inks the number 4562 into her forearm. Looking into the woman's eyes, Lale feels his heart skip and he has to turn away. When he looks back, she's already gone.

A few weeks after tattooing prisoner 4562, Lale comes to work to find that Pepan isn't there. Houstek tells Lale that he'll be working alone and that he is now the *Tätowierer*, ignoring Lale's questions about what happened to Pepan. Houstek then introduces Lale to an officer named Baretski, whom he says will be "responsible" for Lale. When Houstek leaves, Baretski points his rifle at Lale, who stares back at him. Lale notices that Baretski is a mere boy dressed in a uniform, though Lale eventually drops his gaze. Baretski says that he's now in charge of Lale's life, and Lale says that he'll try not to let him down. Baretski then informs Lale that he will now live in his own block, and when Lale says that he likes his current accommodations, Baretski explains that Lale will need the "protection" of a separate block because the *Tätowierer* technically works for the SS.

Lale asks Baretski for an assistant to help him get through all the prisoners he must tattoo, so Baretski pulls a man out of line and he declares that prisoner individual will be Lale's helper. This prisoner's name is Leon, and Lale instructs him in a strong voice reminiscent of Pepan's that he should watch Lale work. He is, Lale says, the new assistant to the *Tätowierer*, a job that might end up saving his life.

After work, Baretski gives Lale a **bag** in which to keep the tattooing supplies and he tells him to report to an administration building each morning. Baretski then takes Lale to his new block, which is in a new building. Once inside, Lale discovers that he has a private room, and then Baretski takes him to a nearby dining hall, where he explains that Lale is now allowed to have more food than the average prisoner. Accordingly, Lale takes seconds and he hides them in his sleeve. He then makes his way to Block 7 and he walks easily by the kapo, who has apparently been informed that he's no longer in charge of Lale. Inside, Lale finds Leon and he tells him to come outside. Once out of the kapo's earshot, he gives his starving assistant bread, knowing that Leon has not yet been given any food.

This scene is the same one that appears in the prologue, a fact that emphasizes its importance. A natural romantic, it's clear in this moment that Lale is infatuated with prisoner 4562. Moreover, though, his attraction to her is yet another reminder that he's capable of embodying optimism even in the most difficult circumstances, allowing himself to focus on love instead of death and fear.



Yet again, Lale's life in Birkenau is full of uncertainty. This is made especially apparent by the fact that Lale has no idea what happened to Pepan—or, for that matter, whether or not the same thing will eventually happen to him. Furthermore, Lale's new post as the camp's tattooist comes with certain privileges, but Baretski's claim that Lale will need "protection" suggests that these privileges might actually put him in danger. This is because Lale's fellow prisoners might resent him for working for the Nazis. In turn, Lale is forced to grapple with the idea that—in his attempt to survive—he is put at odds with people like himself.



Lale doesn't have much time to process the fact that he has become the new tattooist. Instead of considering this new change, he immediately assumes the role that Pepan left behind, doing his best to give his new assistant, Leon, the same kind of confidence that Pepan gave him. In doing so, Lale emphasizes the idea that the job itself could end up saving Leon's life, thereby giving Leon the same kind of hope that Pepan originally gave him.



Lale's decision to share his extra rations demonstrates his willingness to put others before himself. Rather than using his new privileges to his own benefit, he goes out of his way to make sure that Leon has had enough to eat. In turn, readers see that Lale is prepared to use his relative position of power for good, thereby making up for the reservations he has about tattooing his fellow prisoners.



On his way back to his new room, Lale wonders if his new position will put him in danger. Although he has better living conditions and more protection from the guards, he knows that some of the other prisoners might start to resent him, so he reminds himself to be careful about trusting others. In keeping with this, he remembers that he thought he heard someone call him a “collaborator” when he was leaving Block 7.

When Lale retrieves his **bag** of supplies from the administration building the next day, an office worker tells him that this bag will keep him safe. If he carries it with him wherever he goes, the worker explains, he can show it to guards and say “Politische Abteilung” (political worker) and nobody will bother him. At the end of each day, Lale must return the papers he receives in the morning, but he can keep the bag. Hearing this, Baretzki confirms that everything the office worker said is true. With this bag, Lale will be safe from everyone—everyone, that is, except for Baretzki himself. If Lale ever errs in a way that makes Baretzki look bad, he says, nothing will save him.

Lale becomes accustomed to his daily routine. On particularly busy days, Baretzki beats Leon and he verbally abuses him. Though Lale wants to help his assistant, he learns that interfering on Leon’s behalf only makes things worse. On one particularly busy day, they have to work long into the night, which upsets Baretzki because he wants to leave. Finally, at the end of the day, he announces that he’s not going to walk Lale and Leon back to Birkenau, instead planning on sleeping at Auschwitz’s main compound. He then tells Lale and Leon to walk themselves back, ordering them to return at eight in the morning, though they won’t have any way of knowing what time it is. Hearing this, Leon wants to stay at Auschwitz, too, but Lale insists that they return because Leon will get in trouble for not being in his block.

Although Lale has apparently decided to use his privileges as the tattooist to help his fellow prisoners, he’s perfectly aware that some people might resent him because of his new position. Worse, he knows that some prisoners might see him as a “collaborator” because of the fact that the tattooist works under the umbrella of the SS. All the same, Lale knows that this is the cost he’ll have to pay in order to not only survive, but to use his power for good. Simply put, then, he learns that certain sacrifices will have to be made if he wants to survive and help others at the same time—one of these sacrifices, it seems, will have to be his popularity.



The power of Lale’s bag is noteworthy, since it symbolizes the protection afforded to him by his new position as the tattooist. Unlike the average prisoner (who is in constant danger of getting harassed, beaten, or killed by SS officers), Lale has at least a small amount of protection. And yet, Baretzki is quick to point out that Lale is not completely safe, especially from him. By saying this, Baretzki effectively keeps Lale in a state of uncertainty, forcing him to continue going through his life in fear.



In this section, Baretzki exhibits his cruelty, demonstrating very clearly that he doesn’t care about Lale or Leon’s wellbeing. Still, Lale is apparently safer than Leon, considering that Baretzki doesn’t beat him at random. To make up for this, Lale takes special care to look out for Leon when he can, which is why he insists that they return to Birkenau when Baretzki decides to sleep at Auschwitz. Indeed, he doesn’t want to go back for himself, but because he knows Leon would get in trouble if he didn’t return to Block 7. This dynamic also calls attention to the difficult positions that SS officers often put prisoners in, since Baretzki’s decision to spend the night at Auschwitz makes it harder for Leon to avoid getting in trouble with the Nazis who will conduct a headcount in his block the following day. In turn, readers see how difficult it is to avoid punishment in Auschwitz-Birkenau.



Lale and Leon walk back to Birkenau. The next morning, Lale fetches Leon on time, and together they make the two-and-a-half-mile trek to Auschwitz. Upon arriving, though, Baretski tells them to turn around, saying that the day's batch of new prisoners has been taken to Birkenau. Exhausted, the three of them return once more, but Leon is so tired by the time they start working that he accidentally drops his needle. Seeing this, Baretski uses the butt of his rifle to hit Leon in the back and then Baretski puts his foot on Leon's back and he keeps him from standing. At this point, Houstek comes over and he whispers in Baretski's ear before walking away. Letting Leon stand, Baretski turns to Lale and he says that Lale is lucky to have "been placed under the auspices of the political wing" of the Nazi regime. Smiling, he suggests that they be friends.

On Sundays, the prisoners don't have to work and they're allowed to walk around the grounds near their blocks. On one such day, Lale finally sees the female prisoner who made his heart skip. They lock eyes and they stand apart from each other—but before Lale can approach her, Baretski comes over and he puts a hand on Lale's shoulder. Ruining the moment, Baretski says, "Very nice." As he and Lale walk away, Baretski offers to relay a letter to the woman on Lale's behalf, saying that he can get him a pencil and some paper. However, Lale doesn't say anything because he knows that prisoners found with paper are executed. Changing the topic, he asks Baretski where they're going, and Baretski explains that they will be working for the camp's new doctor even though it's Sunday.

CHAPTER 4

On the walk to Auschwitz, Lale learns that Baretski is a year younger than him and that Baretski is very interested in women. Hearing this, Lale shares stories about his own exploits with women. He then gives Baretski advice about how to endear himself to a woman, asking if he's ever given a woman flowers. The idea of this is absurd to Baretski, who thinks his friends would laugh at him. He also admits that he just wants to have sex with women, so Lale starts walking ahead of him. When Baretski catches up, he asks if he said something wrong, and Lale says he shouldn't talk that way about women, asking Baretski what he'd do if someone said that about his sisters. Taking out his gun, Baretski fires into the air and he says he'd kill anyone who said such things about his sisters.

Although Lale isn't safe from Baretski, it becomes clear in this passage that Baretski has been told to let Lale and Leon go about their jobs in peace. In fact, it even seems that Houstek has ordered Baretski to get along with Lale, putting Lale in an odd position. Indeed, not only does he now have privileges that other prisoners don't have, but he also has a working relationship with a Nazi. Once again, then, readers see the extent to which Lale's life as a prisoner has changed as a result of becoming the tattooist, though it's unlikely that Lale is actually comfortable with this development, since to interact with Baretski on a familiar level means having to fraternize with somebody who has committed his life to the persecution of Jewish people.



In this moment, readers see Baretski's willingness to treat Lale with (relative) kindness. However, Lale still isn't sure whether or not he can trust Baretski, since he knows that prisoners can be executed for possessing paper. Therefore, this tension—between Baretski's sudden friendliness and the possible danger that lurks behind it—keeps Lale in a state of uncertainty, making it impossible for him to know whether or not he's actually as safe as officers like Baretski would have him believe.



As Lale gets to know Baretski, he learns valuable information about him. This, in turn, gives Lale the chance to endear himself to the young man, thereby further securing his own safety. However, Baretski is still too unpredictable for Lale to feel safe, as evidenced by his sudden outburst in response to Lale's question about how he'd feel if somebody sexually objectified his sisters. This reaction highlights Baretski's failure to apply his standards to his own life, suggesting that he has trouble putting himself in other peoples' shoes—a notion that makes a lot of sense, considering that his position as a Nazi underscores his failure to empathize with the people he's persecuting.



In addition to talking about women, Lale learns that Baretski was born in Romania and that he ran away from home to join the SS. Baretski hates his abusive father but he worries about his two sisters at home. That night, Lale tells Baretski that he actually would like to write a letter to the female prisoner, telling him that the woman's number is 4562. The following day, Baretski gives Lale a pencil and paper and he says that prisoner 4562 is in Block 29. Once Lale is alone again, he composes a very brief note: he introduces himself, talks about his home and his family, and says he'd like to meet the woman near the administration building the following Sunday. Confused that Lale hasn't written more, Baretski agrees to deliver the letter.

The woman Lale wrote to doesn't send a verbose response but she does give a note to Baretski. When Baretski passes this to Lale, he playfully suggests that Lale should find a new girlfriend. Still, the letter does give Lale information about her, like that she's from Slovakia and that she works in a warehouse known as "Canada," in which she and the other workers go through the belongings that the Nazis confiscate while processing new prisoners. She also agrees to meet Lale that Sunday but she forgets to include her name. The next day, Baretski tells Lale about his own girlfriend. Lale suggests that Baretski should read good books so that he can impress his girlfriend, but Baretski insists that he doesn't need to do this because his girlfriend is already impressed by his uniform. He then impersonates the way she puts on his uniform and she pretends to be an SS officer.

Frustrated, Lale blurts out that just because Baretski's girlfriend likes his uniform doesn't mean she likes him—a statement that causes Baretski to stop walking. Suddenly afraid, Lale forces himself to keep walking, bracing himself for a gunshot. But Baretski doesn't shoot him. Instead, he runs up and he asks in an insecure voice if Lale really thinks his girlfriend only cares about his uniform. In response, Lale says that he wouldn't know because he doesn't know Baretski's girlfriend, suggesting that Baretski tell him some more about what she's like. As a result, Lale slowly learns that Baretski doesn't know very much about his own partner because he hasn't bothered to ask her questions, so Lale begins to give him advice about how to be a good boyfriend. As Lale does this, he inwardly recognizes that he doesn't care *what* happens to Baretski, secretly hoping that the man doesn't survive Auschwitz.

As Baretski continues to confide in Lale, readers see that he is genuinely interested in sharing information about his life. By listening, then, Lale manages to endear himself to the officer, proving that even the most morally repugnant humans want someone to talk to. It is perhaps because Baretski genuinely opens up about his life that Lale decides to take him up on his offer to pass a note to prisoner 4562—in other words, although Lale most likely still doesn't trust Baretski, he senses that the man won't completely betray Lale by helping him write a letter and then punishing him for doing so.



As Lale gets to know Baretski, he continues to learn about the man's life. Although Lale certainly dislikes the SS officer, he indulges Baretski by letting him open up about his private life. In doing so, he undoubtedly gives Baretski the impression that they are something like friends, though the power dynamic in their relationship remains unchanged. However, the strange relationship they develop does make it less and less likely that Baretski would ever be able to find it within himself to kill Lale. By simply listening and appearing to empathize with Baretski, then, Lale refigures their entire relational dynamic.



This interaction proves that listening to Baretski talk about his private life has given Lale the ability to speak to the man in a way that wouldn't otherwise be tolerated. Although Lale nearly crosses the line by suggesting that Baretski's girlfriend might not actually like him, Lale manages to escape Baretski's wrath. This is because Baretski has come to respect Lale in a certain way, since Lale has let him talk and has offered him advice about women. In turn, readers see the significance of human connection, as Lale completely changes the dynamic of a prisoner-guard relationship simply by letting Baretski unload his personal insecurities.



CHAPTER 5

Sunday morning finally arrives, and Lale waits anxiously for the moment he can finally speak to the woman he's been thinking about so much. Finally, he finds her outside and he gives her a piece of bread and a letter telling her that he hasn't stopped thinking about her since he reinked her tattoo. In person, though, Lale simply asks her name, and she tells him that it's Gita. Before they can say more, Gita's friends whisk her away in a swarm of whispers. In bed that night, Lale lies awake and he repeats Gita's name over and over, thinking about how beautiful it is. Meanwhile, Gita sits up in Block 29 with her friends Dana and Ivana, rereading Lale's letter until she has memorized it, though she keeps peering at it even after she's committed it to memory.

The next morning, an SS officer hits Gita to the ground for smiling and he deprives her and Dana of breakfast. "Don't forget where you are," her kapo says. Nonetheless, Gita simply turns to Dana and she says, "I told you Lale's going to talk to me next Sunday, didn't I?"

The following Sunday, Lale and Gita meet once again, this time going behind the administration building. When Gita asks if it's safe for them to be back there, Lale checks to see if the guards are watching from their towers but he notes that they will never *truly* be safe. Moreover, he says he simply needs to be with her, even if this puts him in danger. Lale then asks Gita how her day is going, and she mocks him for asking such a naïve question. Laughing, he changes the subject, wanting to know her last name and where she's from. However, Gita refuses to tell him anything except her first name, identification number, and the fact that she is a prisoner in Birkenau. Hearing this, Lale makes Gita promise that she'll tell him her name and hometown before they leave the camp, and she agrees.

Even in the dire circumstances of the camp, Lale's attraction to Gita blooms. This suggests that his optimism is still intact, for he clearly still believes that it is worthwhile to love another person despite the horror he has seen. Life, for him, is still worth living.



Like Lale, Gita feels as if the prospect of a new romantic relationship is enough to keep her hopeful and strong. To that end, she refuses to think of anything other than Lale, even after an SS officer strikes her and her kapo tells her to focus on her dismal reality. In turn, love emerges as a lifeline of sorts, one capable of buoying emotional resilience and hope.



When Lale says that he and Gita will never be completely safe, he suggests that his desire to be with her is greater than his fear of what might happen to them if a guard catches them spending time alone behind the administration building. According to this mindset, Lale's developing love for Gita is more important to him than anything else, a fact that underlines the extent to which he believes in the value of human connection and romance. On another note, Gita's unwillingness to tell Lale about her personal history suggests that she is hesitant to embrace the idea that their relationship will ever be able to transcend the context in which it has taken root. This, in turn, adds uncertainty to their bond, though it also prompts Lale to make her promise that she'll tell him this information when they leave Auschwitz-Birkenau—a promise that may encourage them both to persevere with the mindset that they really will survive.



CHAPTER 6

Emboldened by his budding relationship with Gita and his relative power as the tattooist, Lale decides to approach a group of men dressed in civilian clothes whom he sees every day. Walking up to them, Lale strikes up a conversation with two of the workers, who introduce themselves as Victor and Yuri. Victor is friendly, but Yuri—Victor’s son—calls Lale a “Jew boy” and he tells Lale to mind his own business. However, Victor chides his son for being rude and he explains that they live near the camp and they come to Birkenau to work each day. Processing this information, Lale realizes that Victor and Yuri are paid laborers who go home every evening. Victor then tells Lale that the building they’re constructing is called Crematorium One—a fact that implies there will be other crematoriums.

Noticing Lale’s shock about the idea that the camp will have multiple crematoriums, Victor gives Lale a sausage from his and Yuri’s lunch. When Yuri complains, his father tells him to be quiet. He also admonishes Yuri for being rude and says that he’s going to speak with Yuri’s mother about his behavior. Hesitantly, Lale accepts the sausage, and Victor tells him to come back the next day, promising to bring him more food. “Hell, if we can help just one of you, we’ll do it,” he says. “Save the one, save the world,” Lale says to himself. He then thanks Victor and he asks if he would be able to smuggle in chocolate, which he wants to give to Gita. Victor says he thinks he could probably do this, and Lale says he might be able to find a way to pay for it.

After leaving Victor and Yuri, Lale breaks the sausage into multiple parts and he puts the pieces in his supplies **bag** before going outside again. He then goes to the warehouse known as “Canada,” where he knows prisoners sometimes find money and jewels. Lale sees two women whom he’s spoken to before, and without looking at the women, Lale walks up to them and hands them pieces of sausage wrapped in paper. He tells them not to open the packages until they’re alone. He then asks if they’d be willing to bring him jewels or money in exchange for more food, and though the women seem nervous they accept this offer and they promise to bring him whatever they find. Having struck this deal, Lale goes looking for Gita, wanting to give her some sausage— but he can’t find her so he decides to wait until Sunday.

At this point, Lale begins to feel somewhat empowered by his job as the tattooist, which is why he feels confident enough to approach Victor and Yuri. In doing so, Lale gains even more valuable information about Birkenau, proving that the relative security his position affords him has ultimately made it possible for him to gain knowledge, which is perhaps the only kind of power available to him—even if that knowledge is dismal and frightening.



Lale’s willingness to approach Victor and Yuri is notable because it demonstrates just how much his job as the tattooist has already benefitted him, considering that Victor ends up giving him extra food. In fact, Victor also tells Lale to return the following day, meaning that Lale has now found a new source of support—one he most likely wouldn’t have found if he hadn’t been emboldened by the protection of his new job. On another note, Victor’s kindness is admirable, as he clearly empathizes with Lale and he wants to help him however he can (even if Yuri isn’t quite as generous).



By this point, readers know that Lale is more interested in helping others than keeping his extra rations to himself. Now, though, he uses his extra food to find a way to pay Victor and Yuri, apparently wanting to give them an extra incentive to bring him food and supplies—after all, they are risking their lives to help him, and Lale is very aware of this dynamic so he wants to do whatever he can to make it worth their while. Needless to say, it is this entrepreneurial spirit that will help Lale to survive Birkenau.



The following day, Lale goes to Victor and Yuri to tell them that he's trying to find a way to pay them. As Lale approaches, Yuri greets him with warmth, and Victor explains that Yuri's mother admonished him for being rude. Lale then apologizes that he doesn't yet have anything to give the men, but Victor tells him not to worry about it, insisting that they have enough food to spare. However, Lale refuses Victor's offer of more food, saying that he will wait until he's capable of giving them something in return. In response, Victor puts two packages into Lale's **bag** and he tells him to come back tomorrow.

Lale is so dedicated to finding a way to pay Victor and Yuri that he tries to refuse Victor's offer of more food, not wanting to take anything more until he can give something to these two men in return. This highlights the extent to which he commits himself to other people, never wanting to put others in dangerous or uncomfortable positions without at least doing something for them in return. In other words, even in the terrible circumstances of the concentration camps, Lale never stops thinking about other people.



In Lale's room, he sees that Victor gave him not only sausage but also chocolate. Lale then divides the sausage into many pieces, intending to give it to the women who work in "Canada" and the men who live in his former residence in Block 7. Rushing outside, he discretely gives the parcels to the women who agreed to give him jewels and money. In turn, they drop two packages into Lale's supplies **bag**. That night, Lale spreads what the women gave him on his bed, looking at a collection of jewels and several different kinds of money. The next morning, he gives Victor a diamond ring and a ruby in exchange for several packages of food. "Happy New Year," Victor whispers, and Lale sets off into the newly fallen snow of 1943.

Lale's hard work has now paid off, as he's finally able to obtain valuable items with which to pay Victor and Yuri. As a result, he knows he can depend upon their continued support, since there will be a reason for them to keep risking their lives in order to help him. And while this will certainly improve Lale's life, it's obvious that he will give the majority of his earnings to other people, determined to help not only Gita and the women who give him jewels and money, but also the men in his former block. Once again, then, readers see just how invested Lale is in his effort to use his position to benefit others.



CHAPTER 7

On an achingly cold Sunday morning, Lale waits outside for Gita, but she doesn't appear. Right as Lale is about to go inside, he sees Dana, who tells him that Gita is ill. She says that their kapo wants to send Gita away, but Lale tells her not to let this happen, asking what she thinks Gita has contracted. In response, Dana says that Gita most likely has typhus, since several of the women in their block have died of the sickness within a single week. Realizing that Gita will need medicine to survive, Lale urges Dana to keep her alive at all costs, promising to obtain medicine as long as Dana makes sure the SS don't take Gita away. To that end, he tells Dana to carry or drag Gita to work each day and to hide her in the discarded clothes, making sure nobody notices her illness.

Life in the concentration camps is never easy. Lale learns this yet again when he suddenly has to face the possibility of Gita dying. Although things have been going relatively well for Lale over the past few weeks, he can't make up for the fact that Gita is surrounded by sick prisoners and she's forced to live in untenable conditions. All the same, Lale's new relationship with Victor and Yuri allows him to at least explore the possibility of obtaining medicine for Gita, proving once more how valuable this connection is. For that matter, it's worth remembering that Lale would never have had the courage to approach Victor and Yuri in the first place if he didn't have the protection of his job as the tattooist, meaning that this position has once again put him in an advantageous position, one he can possibly use to save Gita's life.



The next day, Lale rushes to Victor and Yuri and he asks them to get him penicillin or a similar kind of medication. To make his case, he drops everything he has received from "Canada" into Victor's bag. Victor, for his part, assures Lale that they'll be able to obtain the medication and then he gives Lale several packages of food.

Again, Lale's new relationship with Victor and Yuri proves deeply beneficial, as it enables him to at least try to help Gita stay alive. If he didn't have the protection of his job and hadn't found a way to convince Victor and Yuri to smuggle items into the camp for him, it's obvious that helping Gita would be out of his control. And yet, he still doesn't know whether or not his plan to save her will work, a fact that once more infuses his life with uncertainty.



After meeting Victor and Yuri, Lale goes with Baretzki and Leon to work at Auschwitz, but his mind remains on Gita as he tattoos the incoming prisoners. Afterward, Lale visits Dana and he gives her all of his food from breakfast. She tells him that she and Ivana successfully helped Gita to work and hid her beneath coats, giving her handfuls of snow to keep her hydrated. Still, Gita is not doing well, but Lale promises that he'll have medication the following day. That night, he considers the fact that he hardly even knows Gita. Nonetheless, he senses that he wouldn't be able to survive if she died. The following morning, Victor gives Lale the medication, which Lale passes on to Dana.

Lale's feelings about Gita are already quite intense. This is because he fiercely believes in love and its sustaining qualities. Consequently, he wonders how he could possibly continue to survive if he were suddenly deprived of his newfound love for Gita. This thought underscores the fact that Lale associates survival with love and emotional connection, turning to this kind of intimacy as a way of remaining hopeful and optimistic about the future. This is an incredibly important aspect of Lale's life, considering that there's almost nothing else in his situation that can lend him hope.



The next day, Lale watches from afar as Dana and Ivana take Gita to work, noticing that Gita tries to lift her own head—a sign that she's already beginning to regain strength. Seeing this, Lale rushes off to find Baretzki, whom he asks for a favor. Baretzki is suspicious, but Lale says that he will, in turn, do a favor for Baretzki whenever he's able to. This makes Baretzki laugh, since he doesn't think Lale could ever possibly help him with anything. All the same, Lale convinces Baretzki by saying that he'll owe him. Moving on, he persuades Baretzki to have Gita transferred to a job in the administration building, where there is plenty of heating.

Once Lale sees that the medication has started to work its magic on Gita, he scrambles to ensure that she will continue to improve. To that end, he hopes to get her transferred to a better environment in which to recover. To do this, Lale must call upon his developing relationship with Baretzki, who—although he's obviously quite cold-hearted—seems to have taken a liking to Lale. In this way, Lale once more uses his connections to benefit others, indicating that one of the most valuable resources in a place like Birkenau is the social capital that comes along with human connection—even when that connection is with somebody as problematic and intimidating as Baretzki.



By the next Sunday, Gita is able to walk on her own. On Monday, an SS officer takes her to the administration building, where she discovers she'll now be working. When Lale comes in later that day to give a secretary the papers from his work, he looks up and he winks at Gita. Seeing this, the woman sitting next to her nudges her playfully. The woman later introduces herself as Cilka, and Gita takes an immediate liking to her. Cilka is undeniably pretty and she's somehow managed to avoid having her head shaved. Gita introduces Cilka to Dana and Ivana, and though Gita would understand if her friends were jealous of her new job and beautiful new friend, the two women embrace Cilka and they accept her as one of their own.

In the aftermath of Gita's recovery, she not only gets a new, more desirable job, but she also gains a friend. In the harsh world of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the importance of this kind of human connection cannot be understated. After all, the only reason Gita is alive is because Lale went out of his way to cultivate a number of personal relationships. In turn, it becomes clear that Gita's new friendship with Cilka is a significant development, since interpersonal connections are one of the only things the Nazis can't take away from her.



CHAPTER 8

Lale and Leon work particularly long hours in the coming weeks, since there are so many new arrivals. During a long shift of tattooing, an incredibly large man sits down and he gives Lale his arm. As he does so, he whispers, “I’m very hungry.” Lale feels sorry for the man because of his hulking size—he recognizes that the man probably hasn’t eaten for days and that he needs more food than the average person. Lale tells the man to hide in a nearby patch of darkness, promising to fetch him when he’s finished tattooing the other prisoners. When the work is over, then, Lale lags until all of the SS officers have left, at which point he takes the man—whose name is Jakub—to his room and he gives him bread and sausage. Jakub tells Lale that he’s from America but that he was rounded up by the Nazis while visiting family in Poland.

Trying to reassure Jakub, Lale tells him that he’ll survive Auschwitz-Birkenau because of his size, saying that the Nazis will surely find work for him because they have a “knack for finding the right person for the right job.” Jakub tells Lale that he’s been assigned to Block 7, so Lale brings his new friend to his former block, sneaking him inside so that he’s there in the morning when the kapo calls his number.

Lale hasn’t seen Gita for five weeks because he’s had so much work. Missing her, he walks out into the compound and he finds a group of men crowded around Jakub, who is heroically bending steel with his bare hands, performing for the onlookers. As he does this, Houstek approaches him and he watches for a moment before telling several SS officers to take him away. Shortly after this happens, Lale finally finds Gita and he takes her behind the administration building, where he puts a piece of chocolate in her mouth. After a moment, they kiss, and then Lale gives her more chocolate, which he tells her to share with the other girls in her block.

After parting ways with Gita, Lale comes across Baretski, who tells him that they need to go to Auschwitz to tattoo new prisoners. On the walk there, Lale notices that Baretski is in a remarkably bad mood, refusing to return the greetings of other SS officers who are overseeing several crews of prisoners working on the road. At one point, Lale and Baretski spot several prisoners resting in their path, and when they fail to move, Baretski takes out his gun and shoots them. Astounded, Lale stops, but Baretski simply continues walking. In his horror, Lale thinks back to the last time he saw such an unprovoked act of violence, when two officers murdered the three men going to the bathroom on his first night in the camp. Not wanting to upset Baretski, Lale runs after him.

Again, Lale goes out of his way to help somebody else. This time, though, there is no tangible benefit to himself. In the past, the people Lale has helped have been people he already knows—individuals about whom he cares. This time, though, he goes out of his way to help someone simply because he thinks it’s the right thing to do. By coming to Jakub’s aid, Lale demonstrates his commitment to supporting his fellow prisoners whenever he can, even if he’s never met them before. This, it seems, is how Lale has chosen to use his position as the tattooist for good.



Lale not only helps Jakub by giving him food, he also makes a point of trying to soothe his new friend on an emotional level. This is because Lale knows what it feels like to be plunged into a terrifying state of uncertainty upon arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau. To ease this troublesome sense of uncertainty, then, Lale assures Jakub that he’ll be able to survive, thereby giving hope to a man who might otherwise find himself hopeless.



In keeping with the uncertainty that characterizes life in the concentration camps, Lale has no idea what happens to Jakub after Houstek takes him away. This lack of knowledge is common in Lale’s everyday life, which is perhaps why he chooses to focus on something else: his relationship with Gita. Indeed, when the two lovers sneak behind the administration building to eat chocolate, they decide to focus their emotional energies on the only positive dynamic available to them: their feelings for each other.



This scene serves as a reminder that Baretski is a very dangerous and merciless man. Although he seems to have developed a certain fondness for Lale, there’s no denying that he’s capable of great evil. In keeping with this, Lale undoubtedly grasps in this moment that—however lenient Baretski might seem with him—the officer could easily turn on him without notice. Once more, then, Lale must face uncertainty, not knowing when or if Baretski will decide to kill him.



CHAPTER 9

Lale and Leon report to work one day to discover that they'll be tattooing a group of people Baretski refers to as "Gypsies." Among these new arrivals are many kids, and when Lale asks if they're really expected to tattoo mere children, Baretski tells him that they will tattoo whomever they're told to tattoo. When Baretski walks away, Leon says that he can't possibly do this. Thankfully, though, they learn that they don't actually have to tattoo the children, though Lale still feels sorry for the mothers who sit before him. That same day, an SS officer takes Cilka and he drags her down the hall as Gita tries not to show her distress. Thrown into a nearby room, Cilka looks up to find a large bed. She also discovers that Schwarzhuber, the leader of Birkenau, is standing above her. As Cilka tries not to protest, Schwarzhuber rapes her.

The "Gypsies" Lale tattooed end up moving into his building, meaning that he's no longer the only resident in his block, though he still has a private room. Many of these new arrivals are children, and Lale learns that he can communicate with the families by speaking a "bastardized form" of Hungarian. When he shows his new neighbors his room, he tells them they aren't allowed to enter it under any circumstances, privately worrying that—because of what he thinks he knows about "Gypsy culture"—they might steal his jewels and money. At the same time, Lale also promises them that he'll tell them anything he hears about what is to become of them. When they tell Lale that they've never spoken to a Jewish person before, he points out that he's never spoken to a "Gypsy."

CHAPTER 10

Lale learns that the term "Gypsy" is derogatory and that he should refer to his new blockmates as Romanies. The Romany people soon accept Lale into their lives, sharing stories about their past experiences and teaching him about their culture. In turn, Lale helps them pass the time by suggesting that they teach their children about their own history, something that will not only educate the little boys and girls, but will also keep the older women who teach them busy. Lale sits in on these lessons and he slowly grows closer to the Romany people, forming an especially close bond with an old woman named Nadya who lost her son and husband to typhus before coming to Birkenau. Nadya has a motherly presence that comforts Lale, so they often stay up late together and they talk about their lives—something that comforts Lale while also making him yearn for his family.

The horror of life at Auschwitz-Birkenau is on full display in this section of the novel, as Lale struggles to conceive of the fact that there are many children and families coming to the camps. In addition, Cilka is forced to endure a terrible fate at the hands of Birkenau's most powerful SS officer, an incredibly traumatic incident that emphasizes just how little power the prisoners have when it comes to their own safety. Knowing that to resist Schwarzhuber would only make things worse, Cilka endures his sexual violence without a word, sensing that this is the only path to survival.



Today, the term "Gypsy" is considered an outdated slur that bears negative connotations, but Lale doesn't seem to know that the word could be offensive. Or, if he does, the knowledge doesn't stop him from using the word, since he clearly has certain unexamined prejudices against his new neighbors. Assuming that they will steal his jewels and money, Lale tells them not to enter his room, thereby perpetuating a divisive worldview that is rather similar to the one that led to Lale's own imprisonment as a Jewish man. At the same time, though, Lale appears willing to interact with his new neighbors in a relatively friendly manner, meaning that he will most likely find it within himself to overcome his prejudice.



Lale is able to overcome his biases about the Romany people because of his tendency to empathize with and relate to others. Rather than writing them off based on what he thinks he knows about their culture, Lale listens to them and he forms meaningful relationships with people like Nadya. In doing so, he invests himself in their lives in a way that allows them to connect with one another. Once again, then, Lale demonstrates his power to relate with other people, and readers see that his capacity for empathy has a tangible benefit on his daily life. The relationships Lale establishes with the Romany people are enriching and fulfilling, ultimately bringing him happiness in an environment in which joy is hard to come by.



CHAPTER 11

While tattooing one day, Lale notices the officer in a white coat walking down the line of prisoners again. This time, he comes up to Lale and he stands beside him, inspecting Lale's handiwork before moving on, whistling and smiling strangely as he goes. When the man is out of earshot, Baretzki tells Lale that this man is the camp's new doctor, Herr Doktor Josef Mengele. He notes that Lale will want to avoid Mengele as much as possible, admitting that even he finds Mengele creepy. When Lale asks what Mengele is doing here, Baretzki explains that the doctor will be at many of these "selections" because he is searching for a specific kind of patient. "I take it being sick is not a criterion for him," Lale says, to which Baretzki keels over with laughter.

Later that day, Lale hears Mengele's whistling again, and it frightens him so much that he presses the needle too hard into the arm of the prisoner he's tattooing, causing her to yelp. As Lale quickly tries to clean the blood, he senses Mengele's presence over his shoulder. Mengele asks Lale if there's something wrong and if Lale is the *Tätowierer*. Stammering, Lale answers Mengele's question. Mengele then stares at Lale with lifeless eyes and an odd, tight smile before walking away. That night, Lale is about to wash a bloodstain from his shirt when he decides to keep it as a reminder of how dangerous this doctor is, sensing that Mengele will cause unprecedented amounts of pain instead of healing people.

The following day, Lale and Leon are tattooing women again when Lale notices Mengele inspecting the prisoners and shoving them either to the right or the left. What Mengele is looking for is unclear to Lale, who stares furiously at the twisted doctor until Mengele looks up and he notices Lale's glare. Mengele calls an SS officer over, whispers in his ear, and then sends him to Lale. "What do you want?" Lale asks the officer, but the officer tells him to be quiet and addresses Leon, saying, "Leave your things and come with me." When Lale objects and says that he needs Leon's help in order to finish, the officer ignores him. Leon, for his part, nervously tells Lale to keep working, saying he'll be fine as he's taken away by the officer.

Yet again, Baretzki shows his willingness to confide in Lale, this time admitting that he finds Josef Mengele unsettling. In fact, he even gives Lale advice, warning him to stay away from Mengele. This suggests that Baretzki cares enough about Lale to help him, even in this small way. However, he later laughs at the idea that Mengele would ever try to use his role as the camp's doctor to cure sick prisoners. This reminds readers (and Lale) that Baretzki is still quite heartless and unempathetic, despite the fact that he seemingly likes Lale. In turn, whatever favors he does for Lale feel especially significant, since he's otherwise so unkind and brutal.



At this point in Lale's stay at Birkenau, Mengele's presence is still shrouded in mystery. All he knows is that Mengele is a doctor, but it seems rather obvious that Mengele has a sinister agenda—one that has nothing to do with healing sick prisoners. Worse, Mengele appears rather frequently to look for certain prisoners, meaning that Lale is often forced to work in the doctor's presence. Given that Lale doesn't know what, exactly, Mengele is doing to the prisoners he selects, this development only adds more uncertainty to Lale's life, as he fears not only for the people around him, but also for himself, hoping all the while that Mengele won't take him away.



Mengele's decision to take Leon is quite ominous, as it reminds Lale that he, too, is in danger of being taken away by the sinister doctor. Worse, though, it seems that Mengele decided to take Leon as a way of sending Lale a message in response to Lale staring at Mengele with such blatant contempt. In this way, Mengele intimidates Lale not by punishing him, but by punishing Lale's friend, undoubtedly causing Lale to feel both frightened and guilty for having glared at the doctor in the first place. In this sense, Mengele seems to have intuited that one of the most effective ways of unsettling Lale is to persecute the people he cares about, since Lale devotes so much of himself to the task of helping others.



CHAPTER 12

On the way to work the next day, Baretski asks Lale if he will round up a team of prisoners to face off against the officers in a game of soccer. Baretski says that he and his friends need entertainment, and though this is the last thing Lale wants to provide for Baretski and his wretched colleagues, he agrees to assemble a team. Later that day, after distributing food to various parts of the camp (giving some to the Romany people, some to Block 7, and some to Gita and her friends), Lale addresses the men in Block 7 and he asks them to play a game of soccer. Many hate this idea, but others like it, noting that they know prisoners who played professionally before coming to the camps. Therefore, Lale is able to put together a team of willing and eager participants.

On the day of the game against the officers, Lale addresses his teammates in a huddle and he tells them that under no circumstances can they let themselves win, despite the fact that several of them have played professionally. This disappoints some of the men, but Lale insists that it would be dangerous to embarrass the SS officers, and everyone agrees. Within 10 minutes, though, the prisoners are winning by two goals, so they let off for the rest of the half, allowing the officers to tie them. Then, during the next half, they score once more, but so do the officers. In fact, the officers go on to get two more points because the prisoners are too malnourished to keep their energy up. In the end, then, the officers win without the prisoners even having to throw the game.

After the game, Lale finds Gita and he goes with her behind the administration building, where she lies in the grass and she searches for four-leaf clovers. When Lale asks Gita what she's doing, she explains that the SS officers are extremely superstitious and that they will often refrain from beating prisoners if they present them with a clover. After kissing each other, Lale and Gita return to the main part of the compound, and Lale notices from afar that Cilka looks unwell. When Lale asks what's wrong with her, though, Gita refuses to tell him, insisting that—regardless of what Lale says to the contrary—he is unable to help Cilka.

That Baretski and his friends want to play soccer calls attention to just how little they care about the terrible deeds they're helping carry out. Instead of feeling sorry for their actions, they're hung up on the fact that life in the camps is boring. Furthermore, their desire to play soccer highlights their youth and naïveté, reminding readers that Baretski and many of the other officers are little more than boys. Needless to say, this does not absolve them of the heinous cruelties they've committed—instead, it simply underlines the absurd fact that such irresponsible young men have been given obscene amounts of power over entire demographics of people.



The dynamic at play during the soccer game spotlights the power imbalance between the guards and the prisoners. Even when the prisoners think they might be able to win, they know that they can't do this because to beat the officers would be to put their own lives in danger. As a result, the game itself is nothing more than a charade, one that the Nazis use to reaffirm their sense of dominance over an altogether powerless group of men. And yet, Lale and his fellow prisoners know they must agree to play the game, understanding that it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice their pride in order to survive.



The four-leaf clovers that Gita and her fellow prisoners find have actual tangible value in the camps, but they also represent one of the few avenues of hope available to the prisoners. Indeed, finding four-leaf clovers is one of the only ways that the prisoners can protect themselves, so they search for them with high hopes. For other matters, prisoners depend upon people like Lale, whose position allows him to help others from time to time. Unfortunately, though, there are limits to what Lale can do for other prisoners, which is why Gita doesn't tell him that Schwarzhuber has likely started assaulting Cilka on a regular basis after the first incident of rape. Gita knows that, try as he might, Lale won't be able to do anything to save Cilka from this terrible fate.



CHAPTER 13

At night, Cilka lies in bed with Schwarzhuber and she tries not to think or feel anything. When Lale goes to the administration building the next day to collect his assignments, he winks at Gita but he notices Cilka's glum look and he thinks once again that he must find out what's going on with her. In the meantime, though, Baretzki takes Lale to work, where Lale sees an enclosed area of the compound's yard. The area is full of naked women whom Mengele has selected, and the fences surrounding them are no longer electrified so that they can't choose to kill themselves via electrocution. Ushered inside, Lale sets to work tattooing the women while Mengele inspects them, deciding which ones he wants to "keep."

At one point, Mengele appears next to Lale and, with his nauseating smile, says, "One day soon, Tätowierer, I will take you." When Lale finally finishes, he stumbles outside to find that there are no more prisoners left in the yard. Thinking about what has become of all the women who were standing there just hours earlier, Lale falls to his knees and he drowns.

In Gita's block that night, she stumbles upon a new prisoner who recognizes her. Her name is Mrs. Goldstein, and she used to be Gita's neighbor. Gita embraces Gita, overcome with emotion. Excitedly, Gita asks if her parents and sisters have come to the camp too, but Mrs. Goldstein informs her that they were taken by the Nazis months earlier. Gita's brothers, Mrs. Goldstein explains, ran away to join resistance fighters. As for Gita's parents and sisters, though, Mrs. Goldstein regrettably tells Gita that she heard they died in the camps. Hearing this, Gita slumps to the floor as Dana and Ivana rush over to her, weeping for her loss. Gita, for her part, feels a profound sense of "emptiness," and though her friends encourage her to let out her sadness, she only sheds several tears, not wanting to give the Nazis more than just a few teardrops.

By taking away these prisoners' ability to kill themselves, Mengele has effectively deprived them of their last form of free will. Uncertain what might happen to them, the prisoners are forced to await their fate without even the ability to decide for themselves when they die. Needless to say, this only heightens the sense of uncertainty in Lale's life, as he tries to piece together what, exactly, Mengele will be doing to these prisoners. In this regard, it's worth emphasizing that Josef Mengele was—as is the case with all the characters in The Tattooist of Auschwitz—a real person. During Mengele's time as the doctor at Auschwitz-Birkenau, he carried out inhumane experiments of living subjects and he caused a staggering amount of pain and death.



Although it's obvious to Lale that Mengele is doing something wicked to the prisoners he selects, there is still no way for Lale to know what, exactly, is going on. All Lale knows is that whatever Mengele is doing is sinister and evil and that the doctor is subjecting a great many number of prisoners to his wrath.



It has already become overwhelmingly obvious that uncertainty is one of the most emotionally torturous things about living in the concentration camps. In this case, however, uncertainty may have been helping Gita get by, allowing her to cling to the hope that her family members were all still alive. Now, though, she has to face the fact that her parents and sisters have been killed by the Nazis, and this dashes some of her hope. Nonetheless, she remains emotionally resilient, refusing to let herself show too much emotion because she doesn't want to let the Nazis get the better of her. Although Gita has just received bad news, it's clear that she isn't going to let it completely demoralize her. In turn, she commits herself to survival.



So many new prisoners arrive in the coming weeks that Lale is unable to see Gita on Sundays. Knowing Gita will worry about him, Lale asks Baretzki to pass her a note explaining that he's fine, and Baretzki offers to simply tell her himself. He also informs Lale during this conversation that the prisoners will receive extra food and blankets for several days because the Red Cross is coming to examine the conditions of the camps. Lale likes the sound of this, wondering if the rest of the world will finally start paying attention to what the Nazis are doing. However, as the days pass, Lale isn't sure whether or not the Red Cross ever actually comes, though he does notice that some prisoners are given extra food for a short time.

At last, Lale finds a moment to intersect with Gita, pulling her to the side as she exits work one day. She tells him she was sure he'd died, revealing that Baretzki never relayed his message. Kissing Gita, Lale says he has fallen in love with her, calling her beautiful and complimenting her beauty even though she can't fathom how he could possibly see her as pretty in a time like this. Still, he insists that he loves her hair even when it's shaved, saying he'll also love however it looks in the future. Hearing this, Gita says that she and Lale don't have a future, but he refutes this, claiming that they will survive the camps, live together, and lead a life in which they can kiss and have sex whenever they want. When Gita agrees to adopt this perspective, they kiss passionately before going their separate ways again.

That evening, Dana and Ivana are happy to see that Gita is in a better mood, but they ask her why she hasn't told Lale about the death of her family members. In response, Gita says that it's too difficult to talk about such matters, adding that Lale was so glad to see her that she didn't want to ruin the moment. Still, her friends insist that Lale would want to know since he loves her. Nonetheless, Gita decides to keep the death of her family a secret from Lale, wanting her relationship with him to remain a respite from the horror of her current reality. She then apologizes to her friends that she has an "escape" and they don't, but they assure her that they're just glad she's able to find a small slice of happiness—this, they say, is good enough for them.

The idea of the Red Cross visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau gives Lale a small amount of hope. Unfortunately, though, it soon becomes clear that this visit will do little to interfere with the Nazis' plans, especially since the Nazis have apparently gone out of their way to make the conditions in the camps seem better than they actually are. In doing so, they effectively keep the outside world from seeing the truth, thereby making it easier for themselves to continue following their immoral agenda.



Once more, readers see that despite the horrible conditions Lale and Gita are forced to endure, their love for each other endures. And though their relationship sometimes causes them to worry more than they would if they weren't so concerned about each other, it also gives them something special to focus on—something that makes them want to believe in their own future and, therefore, their survival. In this regard, Lale and Gita's love factors into their determination to make it out of Birkenau alive.



The fact that Gita's friends are happy for her and Lale provides insight into the nature of companionship in Birkenau. Rather than envying Lale and Gita's relationship, Dana and Ivana appreciate it, recognizing how special it is for their friend to have an "escape" from their otherwise dismal circumstances. In this way, they band together and try to support one another in whatever way they can, grasping how important it is to help one another through these difficult times. After all, this kind of connection is one of the only forms of resilience available to the prisoners, so they do what they can to support one another.



CHAPTER 14

At work the next day, Lale is shocked to find that Leon has returned. In a soft voice, Leon greets Lale and Lale offers to give Leon extra food to build his strength back up. In response, Leon says that he's lost his appetite because Mengele castrated him. Reeling in horror, Lale can't believe his ears, but Leon apologizes for shocking Lale and he thanks him for his kind offer of food. As an SS officer approaches, Lale instructs his friend to go to his private room to rest and regain his strength, saying that Leon can start as his assistant when he's strong enough to work again. To that end, Lale bribes the kapo of Block 7 to let Leon stay there during the coming days, allowing his friend to recover.

Because there are no new arrivals one day, Lale is told that he has the day off. Before Lale can go back to his room, though, Baretzki finds him and he tells Lale that he no longer has time off because his assistance is needed. As Lale follows Baretzki, he becomes increasingly nervous because they are headed toward Crematorium 3. Playing with Lale, Baretzki asks if he's worried, laughing at Lale's fright. Before they reach the building, Baretzki explains that two prisoners seem to have the same identification numbers and that the Nazis need Lale to distinguish one tattoo from the other. Entering the crematorium, Lale sees the Sonderkommando, whose job it is to dispose of the bodies of people who have been killed in the gas chambers. Lale feels a connection with these prisoners, knowing that they—like him—are doing whatever it takes to survive.

Moving into the gas chamber, Lale sees piles of dead bodies and he's hit by the horrid scent of the gas. Behind him, Baretzki mutters, "Shit," and this single utterance "from a sadist only deepens the well of inhumanity that Lale is drowning in." At this point, an officer brings Lale to two dead men and he shows Lale their tattoos, asking why the numbers match. Studying the markings, Lale points out that an eight on one of the men's forearms looks like a three because half of it has faded away. With this discrepancy cleared up, Lale leaves the crematorium without waiting to be dismissed.

After hearing about Mengele's horrific treatment of Leon, Lale's reaction is to do whatever he can to help his friend. This makes sense, considering that Lale tries to help his fellow prisoners even when they haven't just been through something as traumatic as castration. Once again, then, Lale demonstrates his empathy for the people around him, wanting to do whatever he can to support prisoners who have been less fortunate than him.



Baretzki's initial refusal to tell Lale why they're going to the crematorium is cruel and unnecessary—a reminder that even though Baretzki often shows a certain fondness for Lale, he is still quite heartless and mean. To put it another way, Baretzki is unable to put himself in Lale's shoes, effectively finding himself incapable of properly empathizing with other human beings. Lale, on the other hand, is an extremely empathetic person, which is why he feels somewhat connected to the Sonderkommando. The Sonderkommando are prisoners who have been ordered to remove dead bodies from the gas chambers, a gruesome job that affords them the same kind of perks that Lale receives as the tattooist. Rather than resenting these men for helping the Nazis with their extermination of Jewish prisoners, then, Lale imagines what it must be like to carry out such a wretched job, once more demonstrating his capacity to feel sympathy for other people.



Even Baretzki is incapable of hiding his disgust at the magnitude of death in the gas chambers. And yet, Lale knows that Baretzki is a "sadist," a fact that only emphasizes how terrible these circumstances truly are. In this moment, then, it becomes clear that Baretzki knows that what he and the other Nazis are doing is wrong. Even with this knowledge, though, Baretzki continues to participate in the immoral agenda of the Nazi party.



Outside, Baretski hurries to catch up with Lale and, after a moment, he asks Lale if he's all right. "No, I'm not fucking all right," Lale says. "You bastards. How many more of us must you kill?" Baretski acknowledges that Lale is upset, and though Lale knows this man is nothing but "an uneducated kid," he struggles to understand how Baretski doesn't feel the horror of what they've just seen. As they continue to walk, Baretski makes a cruel joke, saying that Lale must be the only Jewish person to have "walked into an oven and then walked back out of it." Laughing to himself, Baretski sets off on his own.

Although Baretski seems to have registered the horror that he and Lale witnessed in the gas chambers, Lale clearly senses that the man doesn't feel genuine remorse. Instead, Baretski fails to realize the gravity of the persecution he and his fellow Nazis are committing. In turn, it becomes obvious that Baretski's capacity for empathy is deeply flawed, as he is able to make a joke not only about the horror he's just seen, but the way that this horror affects Lale. In doing so, Baretski demonstrates his callousness while simultaneously reminding Lale that Lale himself could someday suffer the same wretched fate as the Jewish prisoners they just saw splayed out in the gas chamber.



CHAPTER 15

Rattled from his experience in the crematorium, Lale goes to Gita's block and he gives her kapo a piece of chocolate, asking her to get Gita and bring her back to the block. Lale waits inside until Gita arrives but he's surprised when she furiously approaches him, slamming her fists against his chest. The only time SS officers single out prisoners and tell them to come with them, she explains, is when the prisoner is about to die. This is what just happened to Gita, so she thought she was on her way to an early death. Enraged, Gita pushes Lale and she hits him, but soon her anger turns to passion as she presses her lips to his. Stumbling onto a bed, they have sex quickly and voraciously, and the act "seals their commitment to each other," making Lale feel even more inspired to do whatever it takes to survive.

Once more, readers see the ways in which love emboldens Lale and Gita, making it possible for them to endure otherwise unbearable circumstances. In this moment, they feel extraordinarily invested in their relationship in a way that fuels their desire to survive. Given that Lale has just witnessed death and destruction in the crematorium, this is an especially important moment, since his relationship with Gita revitalizes him and it renews his will to live.



CHAPTER 16

It is March, 1944. Late at night, Lale wakes to a knock on his door. When he opens it, he finds two prisoners outside and he lets them in. They explain that they need help because their friend escaped but that the friend was caught. This astounds Lale, who wants to know how the prisoner escaped, though the two men don't know. Still, they're worried that he'll be executed the following morning and they want to know if Lale can help. They then bring the young man into Lale's room, and the man explains that he was working outside the camp when he told an officer that he needed to go to the bathroom. The officer told him to go in the woods, but when the prisoner tried to rejoin the group he saw that they'd already started leaving. Worried that an officer might shoot him if he ran after them, he turned around and snuck into the woods.

When the young man who escaped tells Lale his story, readers see the overwhelmingly difficult situations in which the Nazis often put the prisoners. Although this man hadn't planned on escaping, he was left with virtually no choice but to run into the woods, since he knew that running to rejoin the other prisoners would mean risking his life. In order to survive, then, the man had to take a different kind of risk, bolting away and hoping he wouldn't be found. On another note, the mere fact that Lale has invited these men into his room most likely puts him in danger as it associates him with an attempted escapee. And yet, Lale doesn't think about this because that is not the way he moves through the world. Instead of kicking the men out, Lale empathizes with the young man who was caught, once more demonstrating his selfless perspective on life.



Lale tells the condemned prisoner to stay in his room while Lale goes to see if he can save him from execution. Slipping out, Lale sneaks over to the administration building where he asks a worker named Bella if he correctly heard earlier that day that there is a transport of prisoners scheduled to leave the camp that night. Bella says this is indeed the case, so Lale asks her to add the condemned prisoner to the list of people being taken away to another camp, though he has to run back to his room to ask the man his name, which is Mendel Bauer. Returning to Bella, he relays Mendel's name and he arranges for him to slip out on the transport that night, giving Bella a precious ring in exchange for her help. The next morning, Lale sneaks Mendel to the bus, telling him to never get caught again.

Once more, Lale puts himself in danger in order to help somebody he doesn't even know. By sneaking out at night, covertly entering the administration building, and bribing Bella to put Mendel's name on the transport list, he puts his own safety at risk. However, Lale doesn't hesitate to do anything of these things since he firmly believes in the value of coming to the aid of his fellow prisoners, ultimately abiding by the idea that "to save one is to save the world."



CHAPTER 17

Months pass. Lale witnesses death all around him, noting the many ways in which his fellow prisoners die. Still, he and Gita keep their Sunday tradition of meeting up, and Lale often bribes Gita's kapo into letting them spend alone time in her empty block. Finally, Gita tells Lale that Cilka has become "the plaything of Schwarzhuber." This troubles Lale deeply, and he notes aloud that it would be terrible if Cilka became pregnant. Hearing this, Gita says that Cilka won't get pregnant because—like her—she hasn't been getting her period. Embarrassed to have not figured this out for himself, Lale changes the subject by calling Cilka a hero. When Gita retorts that Cilka isn't a hero but merely trying to survive, Lale insists that staying alive is a heroic act in the camp. "Choosing to live is an act of defiance," he says.

Lale's idea that "choosing to live is an act of defiance" aligns with his overall determination to survive his time at Birkenau. Although not everyone is capable of actively defying the Nazis, all prisoners can try to maximize their chances of survival. By framing Cilka as a hero, Lale not only celebrates her decision to stay alive but he also acknowledges that sometimes surviving in the concentration camps means enduring horrible treatment. And though Lale himself can't do anything to save Cilka from Schwarzhuber, he can at the very least admire her strength and resilience.



CHAPTER 18

One spring day, Baretski says he knows that Lale is capable of obtaining contraband. Lale denies this, but Baretski presses on, saying that he likes Lale and adding that they're "like brothers" because he's told Lale so much about his private life. Baretski notes that he has even taken Lale's advice and he's tried to write adoring notes to his girlfriend. Moving on, Baretski asks Lale for a favor, saying that his girlfriend's birthday is coming up and that he wants to send her a present. More specifically, he asks Lale to obtain nylon stockings. Though Lale is hesitant at first, he agrees to obtain these for Baretski.

Baretski once again demonstrates his fondness for Lale, this time suggesting that they're "like brothers." Of course, this is clearly an inaccurate reading of their relationship, since Baretski actively participates in the persecution of Lale and his fellow prisoners. Nonetheless, the statement highlights just how delusional Baretski is when it comes to his supposed friendship with Lale, failing to recognize that Lale has to be nice to Baretski because failing to do this would put him in danger. In keeping with this, Lale's ability to act as if he cares about Baretski's life has clearly become an effective strategy, as Baretski obviously trusts Lale and thinks highly of him, meaning that Baretski will be less likely to randomly hurt, punish, or kill him. In turn, readers see that practicing empathy—even in the most unsettling contexts—is an effective survival tactic.



Lale goes to visit Victor and Yuri, though he discovers that Victor is absent because he's sick. Addressing Yuri, Lale tentatively asks for a pair of nylon stockings, and Yuri says he should be able to get them. Walking back to his block, Lale hears an **airplane** fly overhead and he watches as prisoners run around in the yard and yell excitedly, since the plane bears the insignia of the United States Air Force. Prisoners scream at the plane and they point at the crematoriums, trying to alert them to the horrible events that are taking place on the ground. After circling several times, though, the plane flies away. As soon as it's gone, the Nazis open fire on the prisoners from their watchtowers, killing anyone in sight. Lale hides behind a wall, narrowly avoiding death.

Lale rushes back to his block to help the Romany children who have been shot. When one dies, Lale recites a Jewish prayer, not knowing how the Romany people honor the dead. That night, Lale sits with the grief-stricken families and he thinks about the fact that it's April 4, 1944, meaning he has been in the camp just short of two years. This astounds him, as it seems impossible that he has survived for so long. Perhaps, Lale thinks, the people who shouted at the **plane** that day made a difference—maybe the United States will soon alert the world to what's happening in the camps. If this happens, Lale thinks, the people who died will not have died for nothing. Having articulated this, he decides to cling to this idea, which he knows will help him continue to get out of bed each day.

CHAPTER 19

One summer day, Gita asks Lale if he's lost his religious faith. Hesitating at first, Lale eventually says that he has, indeed, lost his faith. Ever since he saw those two SS officers mercilessly kill the three men going to bathroom on his first night, he has had trouble believing in God. In response, Gita says that Lale must believe in *something*, and he says that he does—he believes in his relationship with her and in the fact that they will survive. All the same, Lale tells Gita that he is completely fine with her keeping her faith, saying that they can even raise their children to be Jewish. When he says this, Gita admits that she doesn't know whether or not her body will be able to produce children anymore, but Lale insists that he'll be able to get her healthy again once they leave the camp.

Gita thanks Lale for his unflinching optimism, saying that his positive attitude makes it possible for her to believe in the future. However, when Lale asks her to tell him her last name, she refuses, saying that she doesn't want to do that until the day they leave Auschwitz-Birkenau.

For a moment, many of the prisoners are overcome with an immediate and intense sense of hope, thinking that the outside world will finally take notice of what the Nazis have been doing. However, these hopes are immediately dashed when the plane flies away and the Nazis start shooting anyone who tried to get the attention of the Americans. Once again, then, it becomes clear that it is extremely hard to embody any kind of positivity or faith in humanity while existing in the wretched world of the camps, where the power of the Nazis is seemingly unshakable.



Although it seems all but impossible to embrace an optimistic outlook in the concentration camps, Lale is uniquely gifted at finding the silver lining in any situation. While it's true that multiple prisoners have just died because they allowed themselves to get their hopes up, Lale recognizes that the mere presence of the American plane suggests that the rest of the world is beginning to pay closer attention to what the Nazis are doing. By investing himself in the idea that the people who died that day didn't die in vain, he gives himself the motivation he needs to continue doing what it takes to survive.



In the absence of religious faith, Lale turns to love. A naturally optimistic person, he has devoted himself to the idea that he will survive his time in Birkenau and, moreover, that he will do so with Gita. In fact, Lale sees their relationship as an entity in and of itself, something to believe in and give them both the strength they need to persist. In turn, readers see how important it is for people to have something to lean upon in times of hardship, whether that means investing oneself in religious belief, love, or whatever else might create a sense of hopefulness.



Lale's optimism is contagious, as it rubs off on Gita and it helps her embody the same kind of hopefulness that he so thoroughly embraces. And though Gita's refusal to tell Lale her last name only infuses their lives with more uncertainty, it is also proof that she truly believes that they will survive long enough to leave Auschwitz-Birkenau together.



When Lale returns to his room, he finds two SS officers inside. His stash of jewels and money is on his bed. When they ask for an explanation, Lale can think of no response. Taking out their pistols, the officers march him to Houstek, who asks where Lale obtained so many valuable items. Lale says he received these things from prisoners, but when Houstek asks for their names, Lale claims to not know. Infuriated, Houstek instructs the officers to take Lale to Block 11, where he's thrown into a small room. He says a silent farewell to Gita and his family, remembering with sorrow his mother, father, older brother, and younger sister. Block 11 is notorious throughout the camps for being one of the "punishment blocks," where prisoners are tortured and then taken to be shot in front of the Black Wall, so Lale has little hope for survival.

When the door to Lale's cell finally opens, he's surprised to see Jakub standing before him. Also surprised, Jakub asks Lale what he's doing here, but Lale doesn't answer, instead marveling at the fact that he hasn't seen Jakub for so long. Jakub notes that, just as Lale had predicted, the Nazis found work for him. Momentarily changing the subject, Jakub notes that he heard Lale had been sneaking food into the camp, and Lale says that this is why he's been put in Block 11, though he doesn't know who turned him in. After listening to this, Jakub tells Lale that he has been sent to beat him into confessing who helped him with his smuggling. This horrifies Lale, but Jakub says, "Like you, Tätowierer, I do what I have to do to survive"—a sentiment Lale understands all too well.

"I am a killer, Lale," Jakub says. Going on, he says that, though his job is to get names out of Lale, he won't actually let his friend give up his collaborators. Seeing Lale's confusion, Jakub says that he will try to make Lale's beating look worse than it is and he'll try to spare him as much as possible—but he won't allow Lale to surrender any names. Because Jakub wants to take as little "innocent blood" as possible, he doesn't want Lale to say anything. "If I must kill one Jew to save ten others, then I will," he says. Hearing this, Lale only feels sorry for Jakub, apologizing that this is the work the Nazis have forced him to do. He also tells his friend to do whatever he needs to, indicating that he won't give up any names.

Despite Lale's persistent hopefulness, he now faces a seemingly inescapable death sentence. In this moment, he abandons his belief that he will survive, instead focusing on the prospect of never seeing Gita or his family again. Of course, what's most notable about this is that Lale would rather die than tell the Nazis the names of the fellow prisoners who helped him obtain jewels and money. Consequently, readers see his willingness to sacrifice himself, clearly believing that it's his duty to protect other prisoners from harm.



In this section of the novel, readers are invited to consider the relationship between survival and morality. More specifically, the story encourages readers to ask themselves what, exactly, they think is morally permissible in the name of survival. After all, Lale and Jakub's willingness to work for the Nazis is ultimately fueled by the same logic: that in dire circumstances, they must do whatever it takes to survive. And yet, tattooing prisoners is much different than torturing them. In turn, the moral reasoning behind Lale's overall thoughts about survival come to seem rather uncomfortable, as readers realize that the same kind of logic can potentially be used to justify behavior that's much more violent in nature.



Although Jakub's job as the torturer seems less morally permissible than Lale's job as the tattooist, this idea becomes a bit more complex when Jakub reveals that he will try as hard as possible to minimize the amount of bloodshed he causes. Similarly, Pepan pointed out to Lale that if he refused to work as the tattooist, somebody with less "soul" might take the job and hurt the prisoners more than Lale would. This, it seems, is the same logic underlying Jakub's approach; although he has chosen to comply with the Nazis in order to survive, he has also taken it upon himself to save as many people as he can, even if this means doing things that would be morally unforgivable in other contexts. This dynamic highlights one of the most contentious questions in the philosophical study of ethics—namely, whether or not moral codes should be upheld under all circumstances (an approach known as moral absolutism) or if what's considered morally permissible shifts depending upon the contextual framework or structure (an approach known as moral relativism). And though it's easy to suggest that whatever is considered right and wrong should remain the same at all times, the fact of the matter is that things become significantly less clear-cut in dire situations like the Holocaust, where people like Jakub face the impossible decision between death and immorality.



After instructing Lale to only speak Yiddish because the guards who will be watching his beating don't know he speaks German, Jakub leaves. Alone, Lale thinks about his family again, remembering how his mother—whom he's always fiercely loved—once told him that he would know for sure what true love feels like whenever he met the right woman. Thinking about Gita, Lale now knows that his mother was right.

When Jakub returns, he takes Lale to another room where two SS officers converse with each other while watching with disinterest as Jakub punches Lale in the face. Once the violence gets going, though, the officers become intrigued. Jakub brings his foot back, indicating that he's about to kick Lale, who's able to brace for the blow. When Lale tries to stand, Jakub punches him in the face, and though he "telegraphed his intention," Lale is unable to prepare himself. Continuing in this manner, Jakub picks up a switch and he takes off Lale's shirt, whipping him and yelling at him to give up the names of the prisoners who help him smuggle food. However, Lale claims he doesn't know their names.

Jakub continues to whip Lale. At one point, he stoops and he whispers to him, telling him to say once more that he doesn't know the names of the prisoners before pretending to pass out. Lale does just this, at which point Jakub turns to the officers and says, "He is a weak Jew. If he knew the names, he would've told us by now." The officers believe him and they leave. When they're gone, Jakub apologizes to Lale and he helps him back to the other room, where he puts Lale on his stomach and he tells him to sleep, promising to return soon with water and a new shirt. In the coming days, Jakub continues to bring Lale water and new clothing, taking care of his wounds. Soon enough, two SS officers fetch Lale and they take him out of his cell, put him in a truck, and drive him back to Birkenau.

In what might be the final moments of Lale's life, it makes sense that he would think about his family and about Gita. After all, Lale has always been the kind of person who devotes himself wholeheartedly to love, so it follows that he would spend his remaining time considering the people he cares about most.



As promised, Jakub tries to make Lale's beating look worse than it actually is. Still, though, it's clear that Jakub will have to brutally harm his friend in order to convince the guards that Lale doesn't know the names of the other prisoners who helped him smuggle food into the camp. This, it seems, is the only way that Jakub can protect his fellow prisoners, even as he tries to also protect Lale as much as possible. In turn, readers see that Jakub truly is trying to minimize the amount of pain he inflicts upon others, though it's also clear that he has been put in a very difficult position, since there is no way for him to completely avoid hurting Lale.



Jakub's plan, it appears, has worked. By exaggerating the severity of Lale's beating, he effectively tricks the Nazis into letting Lale go without giving up any of the names of the prisoners who helped him smuggle food into the camps. What's more, Jakub risks his own wellbeing by secretly caring for Lale in the aftermath of the beating, putting himself in jeopardy to make sure that his friend survives. In this way, he repays Lale for feeding him on his first night in the camp, thereby proving that kindness and empathy perpetuate themselves and cycle from person to person even in terrible environments.



CHAPTER 20

The SS officers guarding Lale bring him to Houstek and they explain that Jakub got nothing out of him. This irks Houstek, who instructs the officers to take Lale to Block 31. In this new block, a group of prisoners tells Lale to rest up, emphasizing the importance of reserving his energy. The next day, Lale learns why they told him to rest: for the entire day, Lale and his new blockmates are forced to carry heavy rocks from one side of a field to another, at which point they're forced to bring them back to their starting point. What's more, it doesn't take long for Lale to figure out that the SS officers shoot whomever is the last person to reach the other side with his rock. Somehow, Lale manages to narrowly avoid this fate despite his fragile state.

On the way back that evening, Lale sees Baretski, who starts walking next to him. "I heard what happened to you," Baretski says. In response, Lale asks for his help, and though Baretski seems hesitant, he agrees to do what he can. Accordingly, Lale asks him to pass a message to Gita, wanting Baretski to tell Gita that Lale is in Block 31 and that she should relay this information to Cilka. This confuses Baretski, but he agrees to do it—if, that is, he "feel[s] like it." As he leaves, Lale emphasizes the importance that Baretski tell Gita to let Cilka know where he is. When Baretski relays this message, Gita is overjoyed to hear that Lale is still alive, though she's deeply confounded by the fact that he wants Cilka to know where he is. Still, she passes the information to Cilka.

Later that night, Cilka is lying in bed with Schwarzhuber when she points out to him that she has never refused to do anything he wants her to do. Furthermore, she has never asked for anything from him. When he admits that this is true, she says, "Can I ask for one thing?" The following day, after Lale has barely survived the hauling of the stones, Cilka and Schwarzhuber appear in the field, and Schwarzhuber goes to the overseeing officer and he points to Lale before walking away with Cilka. The officer then approaches Lale and he tells Lale to follow him, explaining that he has been instructed to return Lale to his old block in the "Gypsy camp."

Lale's situation hardly improves when he's sent to Block 31, where the nature of his work is futile. Indeed, the only purpose of the exercise with the rocks is to systematically eliminate the prisoners. Of course, Auschwitz-Birkenau is now known as a death camp, and though the prisoners were ostensibly set to work, the concentration camps were ultimately part of the Nazi regime's "Final Solution," a plan to exterminate Europe's entire Jewish population. In this way, Block 31 is a more expedited and straightforward manifestation of this goal, whereas other parts of Auschwitz-Birkenau pretend to focus on labor when, in reality, the Nazis' overall plan is to continue carrying out large-scale genocide. For the first time since visiting the crematorium, then, Lale comes face to face with the true purpose of this wicked environment, once more witnessing the unmitigated cruelty of his oppressors.



That Baretski seeks Lale out calls attention to the soft spot he has for the former tattooist. Of course, Baretski is a very cruel and immoral man, but it's clear that the time he's spent with Lale has made an impression on him. This is significant because it suggests that one of the main things keeping Baretski from embodying true empathy is his ability to isolate himself from the prisoners—in other words, he is capable of treating prisoners with cruelty because he doesn't know them on a personal level. If he knew everyone like he knew Lale, it seems, he would have a harder time persecuting them. In turn, human connection emerges as a stepping stone toward empathy and even morality.



Lale wanted Cilka to know about his location because he cleverly realized that she might be in a position to help him. This kind of creative thinking is one of the reasons why Lale is so capable of surviving otherwise hopeless circumstances. Furthermore, the fact that Cilka uses her position to help Lale emphasizes just how important friendship is in the wretched world of the concentration camps, since Cilka's fondness of Lale (and her desire to make Gita happy) encourages her to do what she can to ensure that he stays alive. Without these connections, then, it's clear that Lale would never have made it out of Block 31.



CHAPTER 21

In the morning, Lale wakes to Baretski's voice telling him he must be a cat, since he seems to have so many lives. Laughing, Baretski asks how Lale made it out of Block 11, saying he's never heard of anyone surviving that place. Lale says he doesn't know and then he asks why he's been reinstated in his old room. In response, Baretski tells him that the room comes with the job—he's been reinstated as the *Tätowierer*. He then warns Lale to steer clear of Houstek, who is extremely unhappy to hear that Lale hasn't been executed. As Lale prepares for work, he apologizes to Baretski for failing to get the nylons for his girlfriend, but Baretski says that it doesn't matter because she broke up with him. Hearing this, Lale expresses his sympathy. He then focuses on reuniting with Leon, who is astonished and overjoyed to see him back at work.

After work, Lale goes to see Gita, whom he finds coming back from her day's work with Dana. Both women are ecstatic to see him. Dana, for her part, begins to cry, but Gita remains dry-eyed. Still, she talks about how happy she is that Lale's alive, saying that she thought for sure she'd lost him forever. Lale then tells Gita to close her eyes, count to 10, and open them again. When she does, Lale says, "I'm still here. I'll never leave you again." However, Gita expresses her desperation, saying that she doesn't think she can go on like this much longer. In response, Lale reminds her that they will survive and create a future together. When Lale asks Gita if she trusts him, she says, "I do," and he notes that she will say these very same words to him someday in a much different context.

Lale returns to his room and he finds two prisoners waiting for him. They tell Lale that they've heard he can get them extra food, though he denies this. Still, they hold out a diamond ring as a payment, urging Lale to take it. He agrees, and in the morning he puts the diamond ring in his supplies **bag** before going to see Victor and Yuri, moving with much more caution than he used to. Victor greets Lale warmly and he asks where Lale has been, though Lale says it'll be better if they don't talk about that. When Victor asks if Lale is "back in business," Lale answers that he will be doing a lot less. After Lale gives Victor the ring, Yuri looks at him and he quietly says, "It's good to see you again." Lale then asks Yuri if he has any chocolate, and Yuri hands him a bar with a wink.

Now that Lale has returned, his relationship with Baretski can resume—something that seems to please the young SS officer, who clearly admires Lale's ability to survive even the most dangerous situations. In keeping with this, Baretski even gives Lale advice by telling him to stay away from Houstek. In doing so, he once more indicates that he cares about Lale. Needless to say, this is largely because Lale has listened to Baretski talk about his personal life in a way that few others must listen. With this in mind, Baretski comes to seem like a very lost and lonely person, somebody who can only confide in a prisoner.



Even after all Lale has been through, he remains optimistic about his and Gita's future. Rather than letting his close encounter with death demoralize him, Lale recommits himself to his unflinching belief that he and Gita will not only survive Birkenau, but lead a happy life together. This, of course, is a remarkable example of emotional resilience, but Lale clearly finds it easy to invest himself in the future because he has something to believe in: his relationship with Gita.



Lale has narrowly avoided death because of his dealings with Victor and Yuri, but he doesn't let this stop him from continuing to do what he can to help other people. Once again, he puts himself in danger to come to the aid of his fellow prisoners, even though he doesn't even know the young men who ask him to get them extra food. This proves Lale's unwillingness to let the Nazis intimidate him, as he chooses to risk his own life rather than cower in fear of punishment—a sensibility that ultimately fuels his overall resilience and spotlights his commitment to doing what's right even when it's inconvenient.



With the chocolate in his **bag**, Lale goes to Gita's block, where he bribes the kapo into letting him spend alone time with his lover. When Gita arrives, Lale explains that, though he still doesn't want to talk about where he's been, there are things he can't hide from her: his scars. Lifting up his shirt, Lale shows her the welts on his back. Running her fingers over the wounds at first, Gita slowly bends toward them and she puts her lips to the tender skin. As they have sex, Lale feels an intimacy he's never known in his entire life.

Again, Lale finds himself energized by his relationship with Gita. Although Lale is uniquely capable of withstanding trauma, this scene proves that he still needs support—support that Gita provides when she kisses his scars, a gesture that lets Lale know that he's not alone in his suffering.



CHAPTER 22

That summer, Lale spends as much time as possible with Gita. Meanwhile, new prisoners continue to arrive, overcrowding the camp and creating tension, since the prisoners who have been there longest don't want to share the perks they've managed to win for themselves. Because of this, fights break out, though Gita and Lale generally avoid conflict. In particular, Lale stays away from any kind of tension, noticing that he's able to exist rather peacefully in his life with the Romany prisoners. However, Lale wakes one night to the sounds of chaos outside his block. When he opens his door, he sees that the SS officers are taking the Romany prisoners away. Horrified, Lale sees Nadya and he tells her not to leave, but she says she has no choice, adding, "I go where my people go. Goodbye, my friend, it's been..." Before she can finish, a guard yanks her away.

That Lale is able to establish a relatively bearable life in Birkenau is a testament to his ability to embody optimism in deeply unsettling contexts. At the same time, though, it's not always possible for Lale to avoid recognizing the horrors of his surroundings. When the SS officers take Nadya and the other Romany people away, for instance, it's impossible for Lale to remain positive or optimistic, since the suddenness of this development reminds him that anything can happen in the camps, thereby forcing him to once again consider the fact that his and Gita's future and safety remain uncertain.



The next day, Lale and Leon are tattooing prisoners when Mengele appears and he begins examining the new arrivals. Eventually, he approaches Lale and he says that perhaps today he will take *him* away, though after a moment he chuckles and moves on. Just as Mengele leaves, a piece of ash from the nearby crematorium lands on Lale's head. Suddenly, he can't contain himself. "You bastards, you fucking bastards!" he yells, beginning to cry. Leon tries to silence him, but it's no use. Immediately, Mengele returns, asking what's going on. Coming to Lale's aid, Leon tells the doctor that there's nothing to worry about, saying that Lale's tattoo stick merely broke. When Mengele addresses Lale to ask if he wants him to examine him, Lale looks away, prompting Mengele to point out that he could shoot Lale for doing this. Gathering his emotions, Lale apologizes, and Mengele slowly walks away.

Mengele is one of the most sadistic figures at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as evidenced by the cruel medical experiments he conducts on living prisoners like Leon. As if this isn't already bad enough, though, he also subjects prisoners to emotional torture. By taunting Lale and saying that he will perhaps take him away, he exacerbates the uncertainty regarding Lale's future and safety. This is why Lale is unable to stop himself from yelling out when a piece of ash—a reminder of the Nazi's ongoing extermination project—falls on his head, forcing him to reflect upon the fact that he has very little control over what happens to him and his fellow prisoners, even when he's dutifully following the rules laid out for him by morally twisted SS officers like Mengele.



CHAPTER 23

One day, Lale and Gita hear a nearby explosion. Running out from behind the administration building, they hear yet another explosion, which they can tell has come from one of the crematoriums. There is smoke rising from the building. Prisoners are running outside as SS officers shoot machine guns at the Sonderkommando, who are firing their own guns from atop the crematorium. The SS make quick work of the situation, defeating the Sonderkommando, at which point Lale grabs Gita and he holds her against a wall as yet another explosion sounds from one of the other crematoriums. After shooting at prisoners ducking for cover, the Nazis issue an announcement over loudspeakers, saying that everyone should go back to their blocks and that they won't be shot if they do this right away.

Gita and Lale return to their blocks. That night, Lale leaves his room and he talks to the new population of people living in his block, most of whom are Hungarian men. They tell him that a group of prisoners working in the ammunition factory have been sneaking explosives to the Sonderkommando, who have been fashioning makeshift grenades. In addition, the prisoners amassed a store of weapons. Going on, Lale's new blockmates tell him that rumors have been working their way through the camp about this retaliation, though they note that the uprising was supposed to coincide with a Russian attack on the camp from the outside—something that people have been saying will soon happen, though the prisoner's insurrection obviously came at the wrong time. Hearing this information, Lale begins to feel optimistic about the future and he realizes that he should speak to his blockmates more often.

CHAPTER 24

Autumn turns to winter. It is now 1945, and Lale tells Gita what he has heard about the possibility of liberation at the hands of the Russians—news she relays to the women in her block. As time passes, fewer and fewer new prisoners come to the camp, leaving Lale with less work. In fact, everyone in the camp has less work, including the Sonderkommando, who feel threatened by this new development—without work, after all, the chances that *they* will be killed increases. What's more, workers like Victor and Yuri have stopped coming, and large numbers of prisoners are transported out of the camps each day. In keeping with this, Baretzki tells Lale one morning that Leon is “gone,” and when Lale asks what has happened, Baretzki gives no extra information, simply telling Lale that he might soon find himself being shipped out of Birkenau, too.

Complete chaos reigns in this passage for perhaps the first time throughout the entire novel. Although Lale and Gita have no idea what's going on, it's clear that the Sonderkommando have decided to take a stand against the Nazis. Still, it remains unclear how, exactly, they obtained weapons or the ability to make explosives. More than ever, then, Lale and Gita find themselves lacking crucial information—information that has a direct impact on their safety, since they could have easily been caught in the cross-fire of this unexpected uprising.



Although the Sonderkommando's uprising is unsuccessful, the mere fact that they were able to take a stand in this manner serves as a comforting reminder that the prisoners aren't as powerless as it might otherwise seem. Furthermore, news about the Russian Army suggests that the outside world is finally beginning to take a stand against the Nazis, and though the Sonderkommando's insurrection didn't end up coinciding with an external attack on the camp, the simple fact that this was ever a possibility is reason enough for Lale to reinvest himself in his faith that things will get better. To that end, his decision to speak to his blockmates more often is yet another indication that in the twisted world of the concentration camps, information is one of the most valuable tools for survival.



By degrees, it becomes evident that the end of the Nazi reign is drawing near. Because Lale and his fellow prisoners don't have access to news outlets or any other kind of media, this information trickles to them slowly and indirectly. Consequently, they are forced to draw conclusions from the changes they witness taking place all around them, realizing that something must be happening outside of Birkenau because everything seems to have ground to a halt. And though this is certainly a good thing, it also creates even more uncertainty about what is going to happen, especially since it's unclear what the Nazis might do with the prisoners in a state of panic. In this sense, Leon's disappearance is unsettling because it suggests that Lale and Gita could be separated from each other at any moment.



When Baretski tells Lale about Leon's disappearance, it's clear he doesn't care what happened to the man. Angry, Lale says, "You see your world reflected in a mirror, but I have another mirror." Baretski looks upset, but Lale continues, saying that when he looks into his own mirror, he sees a world that will topple Baretski's. In response, Baretski asks if Lale thinks he'll even live long enough to see this happen. Lale says he's sure he'll survive, at which point Baretski reminds Lale that he could kill him whenever he wants, putting his hand on his pistol. "You won't do that," Lale replies, to which Baretski suggests that he's been outside in the cold for too long and he should go warm up. As Baretski walks away, Lale thinks about how he wouldn't hesitate to kill the merciless Nazi if given the chance.

Yet again, Lale and Baretski have a confrontation in which Baretski threatens Lale but he holds back from actually harming him. By this point, Lale is rather certain that he's safe from the evil wrath he knows Baretski is capable of demonstrating. However, this doesn't mean that he likes the man. Although Lale has tried to be kind to Baretski and he's offered him advice about his personal life, Lale doesn't truly have any investment in the man's wellbeing. Instead, Lale has focused on befriending Baretski as a means of ensuring his own safety—a strategy that has clearly worked, considering that Baretski is apparently hesitant to hurt Lale.



In January, Gita rushes to Lale and she tells him that the SS officers are acting oddly. Knowing there haven't been any new prisoners for weeks, Lale goes to the administration building and he discovers utter mayhem as officers rush about destroying documents. As one administrative worker drops a handful of files at his feet, Lale stoops to help her, and she whispers that the Nazis are going to start emptying the camp the following day because the Russian Army is near. Lale then runs to Gita's block and he tells everyone there what he's heard. Before leaving, he tells Gita not to leave the block because the guards might be especially merciless. Turning to Dana, he thanks her for being a kind friend to Gita. He also tells Cilka that she's the bravest person he knows. When he turns to Gita, though, she doesn't let him say anything, insisting that she'll see him tomorrow.

Lale's privileges as the tattooist allow him to gain valuable information about what's happening in Birkenau. Emboldened by the relative sense of protection that comes along with working as the tattooist, he's able to go to the administration building to see why the guards are acting so strangely, and this ultimately helps him prepare for the camp to be emptied. At the same time, though, there's really not much Lale can do to prepare except stay out of the way and tell Gita to do the same, knowing that the Nazis will most likely be particularly easy to upset during this period. On another note, the kind things Lale says to Dana and Cilka once again highlight the importance of friendship and communal support in the concentration camps, as he shows his appreciation for the way they've stuck by Gita and helped her stay strong.



In the middle of the night, Lale wakes to the sound of commotion outside. Running into the snow, he sees the Nazis organizing an extremely large group of female prisoners, forcing them into lines and marching them through the camp's open gate. Searching the crowd, Lale spots Gita and he desperately tries to reach her, but it's impossible for him to make his way through the chaotic crowd. Seeing him, Gita and Dana try to force their way backwards, but the momentum of the prisoners is too strong to fight, and an officer hits Lale with the butt of his rifle, preventing him from advancing. Lale screams Gita's name, and just before she's completely swept away, she says, "Furman. My name is Gita Furman!" Falling on his knees, Lale screams that he loves her but he doesn't hear her reply.

One of the tensions that drives The Tattooist of Auschwitz is the fact that Gita refuses to tell Lale her last name, insisting that she'll give him this information when they finally leave Birkenau. The danger of doing this, of course, is that it's been an ongoing possibility that she could be taken away without telling Lale her last name, making it impossible for him to find her in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In this moment, though, Gita manages to tell Lale her last name at the very last possible moment, but this small piece of certainty likely does little to alleviate the more distressing fact that the Nazis have taken her away from Lale, thrusting them both into an unknown and unsettling future—a future in which it's not clear whether or not they'll ever be together again.



When the female prisoners are gone, Lale remains in the snow on his knees. Before long, an SS officer walks by Lale and the officer tells him that he's going to freeze to death if he doesn't return to his block. Reaching down, he helps Lale to his feet—"an act of kindness from the enemy at the eleventh hour." The following morning, Lale wakes to the sound of explosions. Outside, he sees frantic SS officers and prisoners running around with the camp's gates standing open. Some prisoners rush through the gate and walk around, unsure of what to do. Meanwhile, a train idles nearby, and guards begin to collect prisoners and usher them onboard. Lale soon finds himself in a group of prisoners who are loaded onto the train, and as it begins to pull away, he watches as the SS start shooting the remaining prisoners.

Like Gita, Lale is swept away into an uncertain future, not knowing if the Nazis are going to kill him or simply transfer him to another camp. When an SS officer helps Lale to his feet, readers are presented with the notion that even the most morally corrupt people are capable of kindness—an idea that has interesting implications, since it suggests that, by contrast, moral people might also be capable of carrying out immoral actions. This, in turn, sheds light on the novel's interest in moral relativism and the idea that sometimes it is necessary for good people to slightly alter their ethical considerations when operating in the midst of greater evils.



CHAPTER 25

Gita and Dana march through the snow as SS officers guard them, shooting whomever falls behind. As they do this, the two women search for Cilka and Ivana to no avail. At a certain point, Dana falls to the ground and she refuses to go on. Gita tries to get her to move, but she will not. When a group of four Polish women walk by they try to help, but Dana insists upon staying where she is, instead telling them to take Gita. Despite Gita's protests, then, the Polish women pull her away from Dana, whom the Nazis don't even shoot because it's so clear that she's already close to death.

Gita is prepared to do whatever it takes to make sure Dana survives, but Dana herself can see that this will only put Gita in danger. For this reason, she sacrifices herself, insisting that the four Polish women take Gita away from her. In this way, she supports her friend one final time, making it possible for Gita to stay alive. Once more, then, readers witness the sacrifices people are often willing to make for their loved ones—sacrifices that end up making it possible for those people to survive hardship.



Finally, the group comes upon a train, and the officers begin to force people inside. During the commotion, the four Polish women tell Gita that they're going to make a break for a small house standing on the other side of a nearby field. Agreeing to come with them, Gita runs with the women and they successfully make it to the cabin, where the owners let them in and they give Gita and the Polish women bread and warm drinks while Gita and the women restore themselves by the fire. The residents then tell them they can't stay because Nazis frequently search the house, but they also give the women the address of a relative who lives in a nearby town, saying that she will be able to house them.

At this point, Gita and her fellow prisoners seem to have recognized that their best chance of survival lies in running away. This, however, requires them to make a bold move, one that puts their lives in danger. And yet, their lives are already in danger, so they have little to lose. As a result, readers observe the relationship between desperation and survival, seeing that sometimes it's necessary to take a risk in order to stay alive.



Gita and the four Polish women reach the nearby town, where they hide in an attic at night and they slink through the woods by day, afraid that the Nazis might search the house. Eventually, though, Russian soldiers learn that the women are hiding in the attic and the soldiers offer to guard the house where the women staying, meaning that they don't have to brave the cold woods in the daytime. This makes the women feel relatively safe until a Russian soldier bursts into the house one night and he tries to rape one of the women. Before he can do this, though, another soldier runs inside and he shoots the man, apologizing profusely. Trying to make up for this, the soldier agrees to drive the women to Krakow, where one of the Polish women has a sister with whom they can stay.

Although Gita and the four Polish women have escaped the Nazis, it's obvious that they're still not completely safe. As survivors, they have to remain alert at all times. Furthermore, they must search for opportunities to improve their situation, which is why they accept the Russian soldier's offer to drive them to Krakow. Little by little, they take back control of their own lives, finally making decisions about their futures instead of having to obey orders. The further they get from Birkenau, then, the more certainty they become about their survival, though they still have to be careful.



In Krakow, the women feel even safer, but Gita decides to leave when she meets a fellow Slovakian who offers to bring her to Bratislava. Upon returning to her home country, Gita lives in an apartment with a group of fellow survivors of the concentration camps. While looking out the window one day, she sees two Russian soldiers jump over the backyard's fence and run toward the apartment. At first, she's frightened, but she soon realizes that the two men are her brothers. Overjoyed, she greets them but she decides not to tell them that the rest of their family is dead, since they can only stay for a few moments and she doesn't want to ruin their reunion.

Gita's decision to part ways with the four Polish women is brave, since this means leaving behind the very same people who made sure she didn't die in the snow with Dana. At the same time, though, going to Bratislava takes her one step closer to returning to her life before she was taken to Birkenau, ultimately restoring her sense of control over her own life. In keeping with this, seeing her brothers again settles a small amount of uncertainty in Gita's life, since she now knows that not everyone in her family is dead. And yet, one thing remains unknown to Gita: whether or not she'll ever see Lale again and, for that matter, whether or not he's even alive.



CHAPTER 26

Lale is taken to a concentration camp in Mauthausen, Austria. A fellow prisoner tells Lale that he's been there before, noting that although it isn't as bad as Auschwitz-Birkenau, it's still quite dangerous. When the SS officers search the prisoners the following morning, Lale takes three big diamonds from a collection of jewels he snuck out of Birkenau and he puts them beneath his tongue, throwing the rest of them in the snow behind his new block. Back in line, he sticks his tongue out before the inspecting officer even asks him to, and the man walks away without further scrutiny. In the coming weeks, the prisoners have nothing to do, so Lale closely watches the guards and he identifies which of them are approachable. In this way, Lale befriends one of them, impressing him with his flawless German.

Until this moment, Morris hasn't revealed that Lale took a collection of jewels with him when he left Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nonetheless, he appears to have brought several diamonds along, apparently hoping to use them as a bargaining tool to increase his chances of survival. In keeping with this spirit, Lale also seizes the opportunity to talk to an SS officer in the same way that he used to talk to Baretzki, knowing that connecting with a Nazi guard can come with great benefits. To that end, Lale's knowledge and command of German impresses this officer, proving once more that knowledge is perhaps the most powerful tool at his disposal.



The officer Lale befriends has never been to Auschwitz-Birkenau but he's curious to hear about the camps, so Lale endears himself to the officer by talking about his experience there, though he only talks about the work he did. He also says that he likes to work instead of sitting around doing nothing, so the guard asks if he'd like to be transferred to a "subcamp" in Vienna, adding that the camp has better "conditions" than this one and that the officer in charge is too old to care about what happens. Thinking it over, Lale accepts the offer, though the guard warns him to keep his tattoo hidden because the subcamp doesn't allow Jewish prisoners. Thanking him, Lale gives him a diamond and he says, "Now you can't say you never got anything from a Jew."

At the new camp in Vienna, Lale keeps to himself, but people eventually find out that he was the tattooist at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Before long, two SS officers summon him and they bring him to the camp's commandant, who asks if he's Jewish. Lale claims that he's Catholic, but the commandant doesn't believe him. Still, Lale doesn't lose his nerve, even saying that he'll prove he's not Jewish. Just as he's about to remove his pants to show the officers his penis, the commandant stops Lale and he lets him go. Outside, Lale feels dizzy with adrenaline and he suddenly realizes that the Nazis have stolen three years of his life. "You will not have one more day," he thinks, enraged. With this in mind, Lale finds a weak spot in the fence, lifts it up, and slips away without even checking to see if anyone's watching.

Lale hurries into the nearby forest. After walking for a while, he hears gunfire and assumes it must be coming from Russians or Americans. While crossing a stream, he realizes that the gun shots are going above his head, so he lets himself drift for a while until he's out of harm's way, at which point he pushes himself onto the banks and he falls asleep.

Again, Lale's ability to connect with others pays off, this time making it possible for him to transfer to a safer camp. Indeed, the officer he befriends even gives him advice, saying that he will have to hide his identification number because Jewish prisoners aren't allowed at the camp in Vienna. This draws attention to just how thoroughly Lale has won over this man, since the guard is not only doing Lale a favor but also breaking the rules by arranging for his transfer to a camp where he's not even technically allowed to be. This, in turn, speaks to Lale's admirable ability to endear himself to his enemies.



Like Gita, Lale has reached the point at which he's willing to take considerable risks in order to survive. This becomes evident when he throws caution to the wind and he offers to show the elderly commandant his penis, hoping to trick the old man into believing that he is uncircumcised. Because he's Jewish, though, he likely is circumcised, but he's banking on the fact that his confidence in this moment will convince the commandant otherwise. It is perhaps because this risky move works that Lale feels emboldened enough to simply slip out of the camp's fence without even thinking twice, a sign that he's determined to leave this chapter of his life behind and that he'll do anything to make this happen, even if it puts him in danger.



Now that Lale has escaped from the concentration camps, he has to focus on more rudimentary forms of survival. To that end, he's forced to brave the elements while also navigating the fact that there is a war raging all around him. If he can withstand the harrowing conditions of Auschwitz-Birkenau, though, it seems likely that he'll be able to survive the outside world—if, that is, he doesn't get caught.



CHAPTER 27

Lale wakes up and he makes his way to a road, where he finds a group of Russian soldiers who pass him indifferently as he tries to explain that he's been in a concentration camp for three years. Finally, one of them stops a jeep in front of him. When Lale explains that he's been in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the only thing the Russian soldier driving the jeep seems to care about is that Lale speaks perfect Russian. When Lale tells him that he also speaks Czech, German, French, Hungarian, and Polish, the Russian officer tells him that he has a job for him, ordering him to get into the jeep. Lale wants to run but he knows it would be futile, so he does as he's told, and the officer drives him to the large chalet that the soldiers have turned into their headquarters.

At the chalet, Lale is informed that he'll be serving as a liaison between the Russian soldiers and the women in the nearby town. Showing Lale to a fancy room, a Russian officer tells him to bathe himself and choose anything he wants from a closet of beautiful clothing. Left to his own devices, Lale appreciates the luxury of his surroundings, taking a long and restorative bath before dressing in a nice suit. After a while, a Russian soldier named Friedrich comes to his room. Friedrich's job, Lale learns, is to guard him. He will also be driving Lale to the nearby town every day, where Lale will be acting as the Russians' "pimp" by offering beautiful young women money and jewels to come to the chalet at night to party with the soldiers. Every morning, Lale will select jewels and currency from a vault and bring them to town.

That evening, Lale eats a decadent meal in his room, though he wonders how he can enjoy it when he doesn't know where Gita is or if she's all right. The next morning, Friedrich takes Lale to the vault, where he selects jewels and another Russian officer writes down what he's taken, telling him to return whatever he doesn't use. In town, Lale finds it easy to convince women to come to the chalet, since many of them have already been and are eager to go again because of the precious items they'll receive in return. At the end of the day, Lale returns the jewels he didn't use, though he hides a single diamond in the cuff of his pants. That night, he stays in his room and he listens to the party below, noting that the women downstairs seem drunk but not "distressed."

Right after Lale successfully escapes the Nazis, he finds himself taken hostage by the Russians. It's worth noting that the Russians are the ones fighting against the Nazis and forcing them to liberate the people in the concentration camps. And yet, these particular Russian soldiers don't seem to care about the fact that Lale has been a prisoner in Auschwitz-Birkenau for three years, instead focusing on whatever it is they think they can use him for. In this way, Lale's knowledge actually works against him for the first time in the novel, since his ability to speak so many languages is what makes him desirable to the Russians.



The Russians are forcing Lale to work for them without compensation—in this regard, Lale is still a prisoner. However, he at least gets to enjoy the luxury of the chalet, finding himself in a much better environment than he was in before escaping. All the same, it's obvious that this is not the life Lale envisioned when he vowed to himself that he'd survive the concentration camps. The question becomes, then, how he will manage to survive this posting and, ultimately, how he will track down Gita.



Although Lale is safer than he was in the concentration camps, his life is still plagued by uncertainty. In particular, he yearns to know what has become of Gita, undoubtedly worrying that she may not have survived. However, this constant sense of worry doesn't keep him from considering his immediate circumstances, especially when he attempts to discern whether or not the women he convinces to come to the chalet are "distressed." Indeed, the fact that they don't seem "distressed" is comforting to Lale because it means he doesn't have to feel particularly guilty about his role as the Russians' "pimp," though the position is yet another one that challenges his moral outlook and one that forces him to refigure his conception of right and wrong in order to survive.



Over the next few weeks, Lale falls into a routine with Friedrich and he even develops a positive reputation in town, as many of the women take a liking to him and his affable manner. While looking at his collection of stolen jewels on the bed one evening, Lale is surprised to hear a knock on the door. After sweeping the covers over the jewels, he opens the door to find Friedrich, who asks Lale if he'd like to spend time with one of the women downstairs. After Lale refuses, Friedrich notices a ruby on the floor and he asks why it's there. Lale says that it must have gotten stuck in the lining of his pockets, pointing out that he wouldn't have been so careless with it if he'd actually stolen it. This convinces Friedrich, who takes the jewel and says he'll return it.

Going on, Friedrich says that he's being transferred and that Lale will now be driving himself into town each day. Because Lale has proven his trustworthiness, the Russian general has no problem sending him to town on his own. Having said this, Friedrich shakes Lale's hand, and Lale tells him that he has enjoyed their conversations each day on the drive to town. The next day, Lale takes extra jewels and money and he tells the officer overseeing the valuables that he'll be back late because he wants to make a stop at the library. Having said this, he sets out toward town, where he parks the jeep, gets out, finds a bike, and rides away. After a few miles, he encounters a Russian soldier who steals the bike but who doesn't stop Lale from continuing on foot.

Bound for Slovakia, Lale walks all through the night until he reaches a train station, where he pays the "stationmaster" two diamonds to let him board a waiting train. Thanking Lale, the stationmaster tells him to board the car at the end, where nobody will bother him. He then gives Lale a sandwich and some coffee that his wife made for him—a gesture that fills Lale's eyes with tears. By the following morning, Lale steps onto a platform in Slovakia and he knows that he's home.

Lale enjoys quite a bit of leniency with the Russians, who treat him like something in between a prisoner and a fellow soldier. This is a testament to Lale's ability to charm his captors, once more drawing on his linguistic skills and his friendliness to put himself in the best possible position—a position in which he's able to convince his personal guard that he's not stealing jewels when it's quite obvious that he is. Once again, then, readers see the ways in which knowledge and human connection can translate to a kind of power that ultimately makes it easier to thrive in the face of hardship.



Lale finds himself capable of easily escaping the Russians precisely because he tricks them into trusting him. He not only impresses them with his linguistic skills (which is why they took him hostage in the first place), but he also does a good job as their liaison with the local women. More importantly, though, Lale has clearly established a camaraderie of sorts with Friedrich, using his charm to endear himself to the man when they drive to town together. As a result, he puts himself in a position to finally get the freedom he deserves.



For the past three years, very few people have helped Lale. In fact, he has mostly had to fend for himself, even with the network of friends and connections he made in the concentration camps. Consequently, it is a deeply touching moment when the stationmaster unexpectedly gives him food and coffee, deciding to give up his own dinner in order to help a downtrodden fellow human. This, of course, is the kind of empathy that has been missing from Lale's life for far too long.



CHAPTER 28

Lale spends four days walking and hitching rides to Krompachy, where he goes straight to his old home. As he stands before the house (which has fallen into a sad state), his elderly neighbor comes outside and she's astonished to see him. She hurries Lale inside because his sister, Goldie, is still living there. Ecstatic, Lale rushes to the door, but Goldie faints upon answering it. When she comes to, she and Lale sit together in the house and she tells him that their parents were taken by the Nazis several days after he himself left and that nobody knows if they're still alive. Furthermore, their older brother joined the resistance fighters and he was killed in battle, leaving behind his wife and children, who were also taken by the Nazis. Goldie, for her part, married a Russian who is out of town on business.

Lale refuses to tell Goldie about what happened to him, except that he's been in a work camp in Poland. However, he does tell her about Gita, explaining how much he loves her. Hearing this, Goldie tells Lale that he has to go find her even though he doesn't know where she's from. Agreeing with Goldie, Lale's elderly neighbor says that he should return to Bratislava because survivors have been flooding into the city. Heeding this advice, Lale goes out, buys a horse and a cart from an elderly man, and sets off on a three-day journey to Bratislava. Once he reaches the city, he spends every day at the train station, sleeping in his cart at night for two full weeks.

While looking for Gita on the platform one day, Lale speaks to the stationmaster, who tells him that he should register Gita's name with the Red Cross since the organization has been gathering the names of missing people. Accordingly, Lale takes his horse and cart and he heads toward the Red Cross office. On his way, a woman steps into his path on the street: it's Gita. Slowing the cart to a stop, Lale gets down but he can't bring himself to walk toward her, so Gita approaches and she says hello. Lale falls to his knees. Stooping to the ground, Gita says, "In case you didn't hear me when we left Birkenau, I love you." In response, Lale asks if she'll marry him, and she says yes. Lale embraces Gita, kissing her passionately before standing and walking away with her through the busy street.

The news about Lale's other family members is certainly depressing, but the mere fact that Goldie is still alive is significant, since it at least means that there is still some positivity in Lale's life. Still, though, the specifics about what happened to the rest of his family are uncertain and they'll likely remain that way for a long time—possibly even forever. This, it seems, is one of the most unsettling aspects of the Holocaust: no matter how many people survived, so many others disappeared and will never be heard from again.



Lale has managed to make it home from the concentration camps safely, but his journey clearly won't end until he knows what has become of Gita—and, more importantly, until he reunites with her. This is why Lale wastes no time leaving home once more to find her, fully dedicating himself to continuing their relationship, which is perhaps the sole factor that's kept him going for the past three years.



Love sustained both Lale and Gita throughout the Holocaust, and this touching moment proves that love has triumphed. Without each other, it's quite likely that Lale and Gita might have given up hope long before reaching this point, especially since they had to go through so many trials and tribulations to not only survive Auschwitz-Birkenau, but also to reunite with each other. In this way, The Tattooist of Auschwitz is first and foremost a book about the hope and resilience that love can inspire.





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