



How we made The Tattooist of Auschwitz

As Sky TV launches its dramatisation of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, Naomi Gryn reflects on her time as an advisor for the production

Lali and Gita Sokolov spent two years and nine months as prisoners in Auschwitz. Making a six-part television drama inspired by Heather Morris' 2018 novel, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, we couldn't hope to capture the depths of that experience, but tried instead to give it human dimension and to make this extraordinary love story – born in a place of unimaginable despair – accessible

to the wide audience that it deserves.

Born Ludwig Eisenberg into a Jewish family in Krompachy in Slovakia, Lali was deported to Auschwitz in April 1942. There, he was tattooed with the number 32407. For the drama, we tracked Lali's story as he was put to work constructing housing blocks in the fast-expanding extermination camp of Auschwitz II-Birkenau, later becoming one of the camp's tattooists for which he received several benefits, including extra rations.

Lali met 17-year-old Gita while redoing her tattoo, which had faded. Gita worked in the Kanada commando, assigned to sift through possessions confiscated from prisoners on their arrival. With the help of an SS officer, the couple began exchanging letters and meeting in secret.

"A nearby community of Roma were cast as extras"

Shortly before the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops on 27 January 1945, most able-bodied prisoners were evacuated from the camp. Gita escaped from a death march, while Lali was sent first to Mauthausen and then to another camp near Vienna, from where he too escaped. Eventually, the pair were reunited and began their married life in Slovakia, later emigrating to Australia.

Soon after Gita's death in 2003, Lali was introduced to Heather, then a novice writer, through a friend of his son and, over the next three years, they met often in the Sokolovs' Melbourne apartment as Lali shared his memories of Auschwitz with her. No one could have predicted that Heather's novel would become a publishing sensation. In our dramatisation, we switch

between these meetings and episodes from the book. Through 'Old Lali' – brilliantly portrayed by Harvey Keitel – we were able to explore the nature of trauma and fragmented memory, as well as the guilt and shame carried by so many survivors.

I joined the production as historical and Jewish cultural consultant in the spring of 2021. I stress-tested anything that looked like a fact, always seeking at least two verifications, often many more.

Sometimes it was emotionally overwhelming, such as the day I spent poring over an image of the exterior of Birkenau's Crematorium 4, hoping to

establish the slot through which the Zyklon B pellets would have been pushed into the gas chamber, and on which side was the entrance through which the unwitting victims had passed. But it has also been curiously gratifying, working alongside a tremendously talented and passionate team to help create a television series that is not only respectful of historical fact, but also of the millions of readers who have been smitten by Heather's fictionalised account of this poignant love story.

You could fill a small city with all that is now known about Auschwitz. I was able to access tens of thousands of witness testimonies through the Visual History Archive created by the USC Shoah Foundation and to visit the readers' room at London's Wiener Holocaust Library whenever I needed to dig deeper.

Every stage of the production presented new challenges. I knew from attending synagogue services in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s that the Hebrew accents from those parts were different from modern Hebrew. I turned for help to Rabbi Thomas Salomon, who had worked with my father, Rabbi Hugo Gryn, in the 1970s, soon after leaving the Czechoslovak Soviet Republic. Rabbi Salomon had learnt Hebrew in Kosice in eastern Slovakia, so knew exactly how Lali would have sounded when he recited Kaddish. A year later, when the actor Jonah Hauer-King was cast as Young Lali, we discovered that Jonah and Rabbi Salomon were already old friends, indeed Rabbi Salomon had officiated at Jonah's bar mitzvah.

Lali was housed for many months in the Zigeunerlager, the so-called 'Gypsy camp' in Birkenau. The drama reveals what happened to the Roma incarcerated here on the night of 2 August 1944 when their barracks were liquidated and nearly 3,000 Roma were gassed. Our Auschwitz and Birkenau sets were built on fields near Bratislava in Slovakia and a community of Roma living nearby in Zlaté Klasy were cast as extras, providing in their performances a poignant note of authenticity.

I went several times to visit the set in Bratislava. Whenever I came down for breakfast at my hotel, there would be another shaven-headed young man sitting on his own. I would ask: "Are you here for the *Tattooist of Auschwitz*?" and we'd sit together as I shared with them research into their character.

Anna Próchniak, who plays Gita, met with me in a café when she was preparing to play Gita after the war, to discuss survivor guilt and post-traumatic stress disorder. In a few brief scenes, she conveys to stunning effect how – even for Gita and Lali, who were able to rebuild their lives together – for most survivors, life after Auschwitz was not exactly 'happily ever after'. ■

The Tattooist of Auschwitz airs on 2 May on Sky. Naomi Gryn is a documentary filmmaker.



Jonah Hauer-King in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*

Finding love amid the horror

Would it be possible to create a believable love story in a setting as hellish as Auschwitz? **Barney Pell Scholes** talks to the team behind the new drama *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* to find out

Although Heather Morris's book *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* was a huge international bestseller when it was published in 2018, debate continues to rumble over its historical accuracy. Now, a new television adaptation for Sky attempts to tackle this head-on. For director Tali Shalom-Ezer, "perhaps more than anything else, the show is about memory".

The drama, which will be shown over six episodes, is based on the memories of the real-life Lali Sokolov, a Slovakian Jew who was sent to Auschwitz. After becoming a camp tätowierer (tattooist) Lali fell in love with Gita, later his wife, when he tattooed her prisoner number onto her arm. The series depicts the recently widowed Lali, now in his 80s (played by Harvey Keitel) recounting his story to aspiring author Morris (Melanie Lynskey). "It was even more interesting how this story unfolds so many years later, when he's sharing his stories," says Shalom-Ezer.

As Lali tells his story, ghosts from his past appear before his eyes, occasionally questioning the veracity and accuracy of his memories. Actor Jonah Hauer-King, who plays the younger version of Lali, says he played "every memory as if it was the truth, because, as it comes to Lali, that is how he's experiencing it".

Despite its nightmarish setting, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* is ultimately about how love can flourish even in the darkest of places. The real Lali and Gita found each other after the war and remained married until Gita's death in 2003. "The thing that I kept coming back to [was] this love at first sight experience in the camp. But then they spent the rest of their lives together. That is the part I find so fascinating and so inspiring," says Hauer-King.

Both director and actor are conscious that the drama is being released at a time when antisemitism is on the rise around the world. "In these horrible times, it's even more significant to remember this trauma," says Shalom-Ezer.

For the director, it was a challenge to direct a love story that unfolds in the most dehumanising place imaginable. "I discussed this with the creative team. We talked about how we could create this relationship. How could we make people believe it?"

The answer was to be true to the sincerity of Lali's love for Gita. "In this environment of fear and death, that's what kept him alive. Love. And what can be more incredible than that?" ■

Barney Pell Scholes is a writer, journalist and filmmaker.



Clockwise from top: Anna Próchniak as Gita and Jonah Hauer-King as the young Lali in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*; Harvey Keitel as the older Lali