

A woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a blue textured dress, stands with her back to the camera. She is holding a brown leather suitcase. In the background, a large, dark, industrial building with multiple chimneys is visible under a hazy sky. The entire image has a textured, painterly quality with horizontal bands of different colors and textures.

From the #1 Bestselling Author of
The Tattooist of Auschwitz

A Novel

Cilka's Journey

Based on
the powerful
true story
of love and
survival

Heather Morris

Cilka's Journey



Heather Morris



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

NEW YORK

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To my grandchildren, Henry, Nathan, Jack, Rachel and Ashton

Never forget the courage, the love, the hope given to us by those who
survived and those who did not.

This is a work of fiction based on what I learned from the first-hand testimony of Lale Sokolov, the tattooist of Auschwitz, about Cecilia “Cilka” Klein, whom he knew in Auschwitz-Birkenau; from the testimony of others who knew her; and from my own research. Although it weaves together facts and reportage with the experiences of women survivors of the Holocaust and the experiences of women sent to the Soviet Gulag system at the end of the Second World War, it is a novel and does not represent the entire facts of Cilka’s life. Furthermore, it contains a mix of characters: some inspired by real-life figures (in some instances, representing more than one individual), others completely imagined. There are many factual accounts that document these terrible epochs in our history and I would encourage the interested reader to seek them out.

For more information about Cecilia Klein and her family, and about the Gulags, please turn to the end of this novel. I hope that further details about Cilka and those who once knew her will continue to come to light once the book is published.

—*Heather Morris*, October 2019

CHAPTER 1

Auschwitz Concentration Camp, January 27, 1945

Cilka stares at the soldier standing in front of her, part of the army that has entered the camp. He is saying something in Russian, then German. The soldier towers over the eighteen-year-old girl. “*Du bist frei.*” You are free. She does not know if she has really heard his words. The only Russians she has seen before this, in the camp, were emaciated, starving—prisoners of war.

Could it really be possible that freedom exists? Could this nightmare be over?

When she does not respond, he bends down and places his hands on her shoulders. She flinches.

He quickly withdraws his hands. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” He continues in halting German. Shaking his head, he seems to conclude she doesn’t understand him. He makes a sweeping gesture and slowly says the words again. “You are free. You are safe. We are the Soviet Army and we are here to help you.”

“I understand,” Cilka whispers, pulling tight the coat that hides her tiny frame.

“Do you understand Russian?”

Cilka nods yes. She grew up knowing an East Slavic dialect, Rusyn.

“What’s your name?” he asks gently.

Cilka looks up into the soldier’s eyes and says in a clear voice, “My name is Cecilia Klein, but my friends call me Cilka.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” he says. It is strange to be looking at a man who is not one of her captors but is so healthy. His clear eyes, his full cheeks, his fair hair protruding from beneath his cap. “Where are you from, Cilka Klein?”

Memories of her old life have faded, become blurred. At some point it became too painful to remember that her former life with her family, in Bardejov, existed.

“I’m from Czechoslovakia,” she says, in a broken voice.

Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp, February 1945

Cilka has been sitting in the block, as close as she can get to the one stove that provides heat. She knows she has already drawn attention. The other able-bodied women, her friends included, were forcibly marched out of the camp by the SS weeks ago. The remaining prisoners are skeletal, diseased, or they are children. And then there is Cilka. They were all meant to be shot, but in their haste to get away themselves, the Nazis abandoned them all to fate.

The soldiers have been joined by other officials—counter-intelligence agents, Cilka has heard, though she’s not sure what that means—to manage a situation the average soldier has no training for. The Soviet agency is tasked with keeping law and order, particularly as it relates to any threat to the Soviet State. Their role, she’s been told by the soldiers, is to question every prisoner to determine their status as it relates to their imprisonment, in particular if they collaborated or worked with the Nazis. The retreating German Army are considered enemies of the State of the Soviet Union and anyone who could be connected to them is, by default, an enemy of the Soviet Union.

A soldier enters the block. “Come with me,” he says, pointing to Cilka. At the same time, a hand clutches her right arm, dragging her to her feet. Several weeks have passed and seeing others being taken away to be questioned has become part of the routine of the block. To Cilka it is just “her turn.” She is eighteen years old and she just has to hope they can see that she had no choice but to do what she did in order to survive. No choice, other than death. She can only hope that she will soon be able to return to her home in Czechoslovakia, find a way forward.

As she’s taken into the building the Soviet Army are using as their headquarters, Cilka attempts a smile at the four men who sit across the room from her. They are here to punish her evil captors, not her. This is a good time; there will be no more loss. Her smile is not returned. She notices their uniforms are slightly different from those of the soldiers outside. Blue epaulettes sit on top of their shoulders; their hats, placed on the table in front of them, have the same shade of blue ribbon with a red stripe.

One of them does eventually smile at her and speaks in a gentle voice.

“Would you tell us your name?”

“Cecilia Klein.”

“Where are you from, Cecilia? Your country and town.”

“I’m from Bardejov in Czechoslovakia.”

“What is the date of your birth?”

“The seventeenth of March, 1926.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I came here on the twenty-third of April in 1942, just after I turned sixteen.”

The agent pauses, studies her.

“That was a long time ago.”

“An eternity in here.”

“What have you been doing here since April 1942?”

“Staying alive.”

“Yes, but how did you do that?” He tilts his head at her. “You look like you haven’t starved.”

Cilka doesn’t answer, but her hand goes to her hair, which she hacked off herself weeks ago, after her friends were marched from the camp.

“Did you work?”

“I worked at staying alive.”

The four men exchange looks. One of them picks up a piece of paper and pretends to read it before speaking.

“We have a report on you, Cecilia Klein. It says that you in fact stayed alive by prostituting yourself to the enemy.”

Cilka says nothing, swallows hard, looks from one man to the next, trying to fathom what they are saying, what they expect her to say in return.

Another speaks. “It’s a simple question. Did you fuck the Nazis?”

“They were my enemy. I was a prisoner here.”

“But did you fuck the Nazis? We’re told you did.”

“Like many others here, I was forced to do whatever I was told by those who imprisoned me.”

The first agent stands. “Cecilia Klein, we will be sending you to Kraków and then determining your fate from there.” He refuses, now, to look at her.

“No,” Cilka says, standing. This can’t be happening. “You can’t do this to me! I am a prisoner here.”

One of the men who hasn’t spoken before quietly asks, “Do you speak German?”

“Yes, some. I’ve been in here three years.”

“And you speak many other languages, we have heard, and yet you are Czechoslovakian.”

Cilka doesn't protest, frowning, not understanding the significance. She had been taught languages at school, picked others up by being in here.

The men all exchange looks.

“Speaking other languages would have us believe you are a spy, here to report back to whoever will buy your information. This will be investigated in Kraków.”

“You can expect a long sentence of hard labor,” the original officer says.

It takes Cilka a moment to react, and then she is grabbed by the arm by the soldier who brought her into the room, dragged away, screaming her innocence.

“I was forced, I was raped! No! Please.”

But the soldiers do not react; they do not seem to hear. They are moving on to the next person.

Montelupich Prison, Kraków, July 1945

Cilka crouches in the corner of a damp, stinking cell. She struggles to register time passing. Days, weeks, months.

She does not make conversation with the women around her. Anyone overheard speaking by the guards is taken out and brought back with bruises and torn clothing. Stay quiet, stay small, she tells herself, until you know what is happening, and what the right things are to say or do. She has torn off a section of her dress to tie around her nose and mouth in an attempt to minimize the stench of human waste, damp and decay.

One day, they take her out of the cell. Faint from hunger and exhausted by the effort of vigilance, the figures of the guards and the wall and floors all seem immaterial, as in a dream. She stands in line behind other prisoners in a corridor, slowly moving toward a door. She can lean, momentarily, against a warm, dry wall. They keep the corridors heated, for the guards, but not the cells themselves. And though the weather outside must be mild by now, the prison seems to trap cold from the night and hold on to it through the whole next day.

When it is Cilka's turn, she enters a room where an officer sits behind a desk, his face bathed in greenish light from a single lamp. The officers by the door indicate she should go over to the desk.

The officer looks down at his piece of paper.

"Cecilia Klein?"

She glances around. She is alone in the room with three burly men. "Yes?"

He looks down again and reads from the paper. "You are convicted of working with the enemy, as a prostitute and additionally as a spy. You are sentenced to fifteen years' hard labor." He signs the piece of paper. "You sign this to say you have understood."

Cilka has understood all of the officer's words. He has been speaking in German, rather than Russian. Is it a trick, then? she thinks. She feels the eyes of the men at the door. She knows she has to do something. It seems she has no choice but to do the only thing in front of her.

He flips the piece of paper and points to a dotted line. The letters above it are in Cyrillic—Russian script. Again, as she has experienced over and over in her young life, she finds herself with two choices: one, the narrow path opening up in front of her; the other, death.

The officer hands her the pen, and then looks toward the door, bored, waiting for the next person in line—just doing his job.

With a shaking hand, Cilka signs the piece of paper.

It is only when she's taken from the prison and pushed onto a truck that she realizes winter has gone, spring never existed, and it is summer. While the warmth of the sun is a balm to her chilled body, her still-alive body, the glare of it hurts her eyes. Before she has a chance to adjust, the truck slams to a stop. There, in front of her, is another train carriage, on a cattle train painted red.

CHAPTER 2

A train bound for Vorkuta Gulag, Siberia, 160 km north of the Arctic Circle, July 1945

The floor of the closed railway wagon is covered in straw and each prisoner tries to claim a small space on which to sit. Older women wail, babies whimper. The sound of women suffering—Cilka hoped she'd never have to hear it again. The train sits at the station for hours, the heat of the day turning the inside of the compartment into an oven. The bucket of water left to share is soon gone. The infants' cries turn wretched and dry; the old women are reduced to rocking themselves into a trance. Cilka has placed herself against a wall and draws comfort from the small wisps of air that make their way through the tiny cracks. A woman leans on her from the side and a back is shoved up hard against her raised knees. She leaves it there. No point fighting for space that doesn't exist.

Cilka senses that night has fallen as the train makes its first jolting movement, its engine struggling to pull the unknown number of carriages away from Kraków, away, it seems, from any hope of ever returning home.

So, she had allowed herself just one moment of hope, sitting in that block back in that *other place*, waiting. She shouldn't have dared. She is destined to be punished. Maybe it is what she deserves. But, as the train gathers speed, she vows she will never, ever end up in a place like Block 25 again.

There must be more ways to stay alive than to be witness to so much death.

Will she ever know if her friends who were forced to march out of the camp made it to safety? They had to. She can't bear to think otherwise.

As the rhythm of the train rocks the children and babies to sleep, the silence is broken by the howl of a young mother holding an emaciated baby in her arms. The child has died.

Cilka wonders what the other women have done to end up here. Are they Jewish as well? The women in the prison mostly had not been, as she gleaned from overhearing various conversations. She wonders where they are going. By some miracle, she dozes.

A sudden braking of the train throws its passengers around. Heads bang, limbs are twisted, and their owners cry out in pain. Cilka braces herself by

holding on to the woman who has spent the night leaning into her.

“We’re here,” someone says. But where is here?

Cilka hears train doors clanging open up ahead, but no one leaves their compartments. Their carriage door is flung open. Once again, brilliant sunshine stings Cilka’s eyes.

Two men stand outside. One hands a bucket of water to grabbing hands. The second soldier tosses in several hunks of bread before slamming the door closed. Semi-darkness once again envelops them. A fight breaks out as the women scramble for a piece of the bread. A too-familiar scene for Cilka. The screaming intensifies until, finally, an older woman stands up, raising her hands, saying nothing, and even in the semi-darkness the stance takes up the space, and is powerful. Everyone shuts up.

“We share,” she says, with a voice of authority. “How many loaves do we have?” Five hands are raised, indicating the number of loaves of bread they have to share.

“Give to the children first, and the rest we will share. If anyone doesn’t get any, they will be the first to eat next time. Agreed?” The women with the bread begin breaking off small quantities, handing them to the mothers. Cilka misses out. She feels upset. She does not know if it’s the best idea to give the food to the children if where they are going is like where she has been. It will only be wasted. She knows it is a terrible thought.

For several hours the train sits idle. The women and infants fall again into silence.

The silence is broken by the screams of a girl. As those around her attempt to quiet the girl, to find out what is wrong, she sobs, holding up a blood-covered hand. Cilka can see it in the flickering light coming through the gaps.

“I’m dying.”

The woman nearest her looks down at the blood staining her dress.

“She has her period,” she says. “She’s all right; she’s not dying.” The girl continues sobbing.

The girl sitting at Cilka’s legs, a bit younger than her and wearing a similar summer dress, shifts to standing and calls out, “What’s your name?”

“Ana,” the girl whimpers.

“Ana, I’m Josie. We will look after you,” she says, looking around the compartment. “Won’t we?”

The women murmur and nod their assent.

One of the women grasps the girl’s face between her hands and brings it toward her own.

“Have you not had a monthly bleed before?”

The girl shakes her head: no. The older woman clutches her to her breast, rocking her, soothing her. Cilka experiences a strange pang of longing.

“You’re not dying; you’re becoming a woman.”

Some of the women are already tearing pieces off their garments, ripping sections from the bottoms of their dresses, and passing them along to the woman caring for the girl.

The train jolts forward, dropping Josie to the floor. A small giggle escapes from her. Cilka can’t help but giggle too. They catch each other’s eye. Josie looks a bit like her friend Gita. Dark brows and lashes, a small, pretty mouth.

Many hours later, they stop again. Water and bread are thrown in. This time, the stop brings additional scrutiny and the young mother is forced to hand over her dead infant to the soldiers. She has to be restrained from trying to leave the compartment to be with her dead child. The slamming of the door brings her silence as she is helped into a corner to grieve her loss.

Cilka sees how closely Josie watches it all, with her hand against her mouth. “Josie, is it?” Cilka asks the girl who has been leaning against her since they first got on the train. She asks her in Polish, the language she has heard her using.

“Yes.” Josie slowly maneuvers her way around so they are knee to knee.

“I’m Cilka.”

Their conversation opener seems to embolden other women. Cilka hears others ask their neighbors their names, and soon the compartment is filled with whispered chatter. Languages are identified, and a shuffling takes place to put nationalities together. Stories are shared. One woman was accused of aiding the Nazis by allowing them to buy bread from her bakery in Poland. Another was arrested for translating German propaganda. Yet another was captured by the Nazis and, being caught with them, accused of spying for them. Amazingly, there are bursts of laughter along with tears as each woman

shares how she ended up in this predicament. Some of the women confirm the train will be going to a labor camp, but they don't know where.

Josie tells Cilka that she is from Kraków, and that she's sixteen years old. Cilka opens her mouth to share her own age and place of birth, but before she can, a woman nearby declares in a loud voice, "I know why she's here."

"Leave her alone," comes from the strong older woman who'd suggested sharing the bread.

"But I saw her, dressed in a fur coat in the middle of winter while we were dying from the cold."

Cilka remains silent. There's a creeping heat in her neck. She lifts her head and stares at her accuser. A stare the woman cannot match. She vaguely recognizes her. Wasn't she, too, one of the old-timers in Birkenau? Did she not have a warm and comfortable job in the administration building?

"And you, you who wants to accuse her," says the older woman, "why are you here in this luxurious carriage with us going on a summer holiday?"

"Nothing, I did nothing," comes the weak reply.

"We all did nothing," Josie says strongly, defending her new friend.

Cilka clenches her jaw as she turns away from the woman.

She can feel Josie's gentle, reassuring eyes on her face.

Cilka throws her a faint smile, before turning her head to the wall, closing her eyes, trying to block the sudden memory flooding in of Schwarzhuber—the officer in charge of Birkenau—standing over her in that small room, loosening his belt, the sounds of women weeping beyond the wall.

★ ★ ★

The next time the train stops, Cilka gets her ration of bread. Instinctively she eats half and tucks the rest into the top of her dress. She looks around, fearful someone might be watching and try to take it from her. She turns her face back to the wall, closing her eyes.

Somehow, she sleeps.

As she floats back awake, she is startled by Josie's presence right in front of her. Josie reaches out and touches Cilka's close-cropped hair. Cilka tries to resist the automatic urge to push her away.

"I love your hair," the sad, tired voice says.

Relaxing, Cilka reaches up and touches the younger girl's bluntly chopped hair.

"I like yours too."

Cilka had been freshly shaved and deloused at the prison. For her a familiar process, as she saw it happen so often to prisoners in that *other place*, but she supposes it is new for Josie.

Desperate to change the subject, she asks, "Are you here with anyone?"

"I'm with my grandma."

Cilka follows Josie's eyes to the bold older woman who had spoken up earlier, still with an arm around the young girl, Ana. She is watching the two of them closely. They exchange a nod.

"You might want to get closer to her," Cilka says.

Where they are going, the older woman may not last long.

"I should. She might be frightened."

"You're right. I am too," Cilka says.

"Really? You don't look frightened."

"Oh, I am. If you want to talk again, I will be here."

Josie steps carefully over and around the other women between Cilka and her grandmother. Cilka looks on through the slats of light coming through the carriage walls. A small smile breaks free as she sees and feels the women shuffle and shift to accommodate her new friend.

★ ★ ★

"It's been nine days, I think. I've been counting. How much longer?" Josie murmurs to no one in particular.

There is more room in the compartment now. Cilka has kept count of how many have died—sick, starving or wounded from their prior interrogations, their bodies removed when the train stopped for bread and water. Eleven adults, four infants. Occasionally some fruit is thrown in with the dry husks of bread, which Cilka has seen mothers soften in their own mouths for the children.

Josie now lies curled up beside Cilka, her head resting on Cilka's lap. Her sleep is fitful. Cilka knows of the images that must be racing through her mind. A few days ago, her grandmother died. She had seemed so strong and

bold, but then she'd started coughing, worse and worse, and shaking, and then refusing her own ration of food. And then the coughing stopped.

Cilka watched Josie standing mutely at the compartment door as her grandmother's body was roughly handed down to the waiting guards. Cilka experienced a physical pain so intense she doubled over, all her breath leaving her. But no sound, and no tears, would come.

Auschwitz, 1942

Hundreds of girls are marched from Auschwitz to Birkenau on a hot summer day. Four kilometers. A slow, painful march for many who have ill-fitting boots, or worse, no footwear. As they enter through the large imposing brick archway they see the construction of blocks. Men working there pause to stare in horror at the new arrivals. Cilka and her sister Magda have been at Auschwitz for around three months, working among other Slovakian girls.

They are turned from the main road through the camp and into a fenced-off area, with several buildings complete, and others under way. They are stopped and held, standing in lines, as the sun beats down upon them for what seems like hours.

From behind, they hear a commotion. Cilka looks back to the entrance of the women's camp to see a senior officer, with an entourage of men following, walking up the row of girls. Most of the girls keep their heads down. Not Cilka. She wants to see who warrants such protection from a group of unarmed, defenseless girls.

"Obersturmführer Schwarzhuber," a guard says, greeting the senior officer. "You'll be overseeing the selection today?"

"I will."

The senior officer, Schwarzhuber, continues walking down the line of girls and women. He pauses briefly as he passes Cilka and Magda. When he gets to the front of the row, he turns and walks back. This time he can see the turned-down faces. Occasionally he uses his swagger stick pushed under the chin to raise the face of a girl.

He is coming closer. He stops beside Cilka, Magda behind her. He raises his stick. Cilka beats him to it and lifts her chin high, looking directly at him.

If she can get his attention, he will ignore her sister. He reaches down and lifts her left arm, appearing to look at the numbers fading on her skin. Cilka hears Magda's sharp inhalation of breath behind her. Schwarzhuber drops her arm, walks back down to the front of the line, and Cilka notices him speak to the SS officer beside him.

★ ★ ★

They have been sorted, again. Left, right; hearts banging, bodies clenched in fear. Cilka and Magda have been chosen to live another day. They are now in line to be painfully marked again—to have their tattoos re-inked so they will never fade. They stand close but not touching, though they desperately want to comfort each other. They whisper as they wait—consoling, wondering.

Cilka counts the number of girls in front of her. Five. It will soon be her turn, and then Magda's. Again, she will hand her left arm over to someone to have the blurred blue numbers punctured into her skin. First she was marked on entering Auschwitz three months ago, now again after being re-selected for the new camp, Auschwitz II: Birkenau. She begins to shiver. It is summer, the sun blazes down on her. She fears the pain she will soon experience. The first time, she cried out in shock. This time, she tells herself she will remain silent. Though she is still only sixteen, she can no longer behave like a child.

Peering out from the row of girls, she watches the Tätowierer. He looks into the eyes of the girl whose arm he holds. She sees him place a finger to his lips and mouth, shhh. He smiles at her. He looks down to the ground as the girl walks away, then looks up to watch her moving on. He takes the arm of the next girl in line and doesn't see that the previous girl turns back to look at him.

Four. Three. Two. One. It is now her turn. She glances quickly and reassuringly back at Magda, then moves forward. She stands in front of the Tätowierer, her left arm by her side. He reaches down and gently lifts her arm up. She surprises herself by pulling it free, an almost unconscious reaction, causing him to look at her, to look into her eyes, which she knows are filled with anger, disgust, at having to be defiled, again.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he whispers gently to her. "Please, give me your arm."

Moments pass. He makes no attempt to touch her. She raises her arm and offers it to him.

"Thank you," he mouths. "It'll be over quickly."

With blood dripping from her arm, though not as much as last time, Cilka whispers, "Be gentle with my sister," before moving on as slowly as she can so Magda will be able to catch up. She looks curiously around for the girl who'd been in front of her. She glances back at the Tätowierer. He has not watched her walk away. She sees the girl who'd been five in front of her standing outside Block 29 and joins her and the others waiting to be admitted into their "home." She studies the girl. Even with her head shaven, the baggy dress hiding whatever curves she may have, or once had, she is beautiful. Her large dark eyes show no signs of the despair Cilka has seen in so many. She wants to get to know this girl who made the Tätowierer stare. Soon, Magda joins her, wincing from the pain of the tattoo. They're temporarily out of sight of any guards and Cilka clutches her sister's hand.

That evening, as the girls in Block 29 each find a space in a bunk to share with several others and cautiously inquire of one another, "Where are you from?" Cilka learns the girl's name is Gita. She comes from a village in Slovakia, not too far from Cilka and Magda's town of Bardejov. Gita introduces Cilka and Magda to her friends Dana and Ivanka.

The next day, following roll call, the girls are sent to their work area. Cilka is pulled aside, not sent like the others to work in the Kanada, where they sort out the belongings, jewelry and heirlooms brought to Auschwitz by the prisoners, and prepare much of it for return to Germany. Instead, by special request, she is to report to the administration building, where she will work.