

## **The Merit of Historical Fiction and the Holocaust**

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Historical fiction has always been a way for authors, playwrights and filmmakers to provide speculative insight into the daily lives of those from a bygone era. Jill Paton Walsh, a British author, states that historical fiction is work that is "wholly or partly about the public events and social conditions which are the material of history, regardless of the time at which it is written."<sup>1</sup> These stories often prove more interesting to the general population, who may be more interested in the relationships, dilemmas and daily lives of characters in historical situations as opposed to simply picking up a historical account and reading it. While historical and speculative historical fiction has always had its place within the popular culture, since the explosion of the film industry, cinema has become a medium for people to learn about historical events, specifically the Holocaust. Many teachers and professors even use these films in their classroom as teaching tools, but can this really be valuable in such a setting when historical fiction is more focused on the emotional aspects and manipulation of facts for dramatic purposes? If teachers and the general public are aware that these stories are made up, based on research and fact, and use them as a springboard for discussion, they can, in fact, be useful teaching and learning tools. However, in some of these stories, the actual facts are very difficult to extract from those made up for artistic purposes, as many such films have been researched to portray events very accurately, and it would take a

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<sup>1</sup> Walsh, Jill Paton. "History is Fiction," in *Crosscurrents of Criticism*, ed. by Paul Heins. (Boston: The Horn Book, Incorporated, 1977), 221.

historian and quite a bit of research in order to extract the real events from those altered for artistic purposes. Historical fiction, however, cannot be completely discounted because it is not real. Instead, it can be used to begin dialogue, discuss historical moral dilemmas and to examine actual events.

Writing historical fiction provides a unique problem in that the world of the work is not invented by the playwright or author, but has actually existed in the past. As such, writers are often writing for modern audiences about past events and yet must find themselves in the mentality of a person from the past. Although one can get very close to this through substantial research, it is impossible, especially dealing with the Holocaust, for a writer who has never experienced such hardships accurately portray them.

However, there are Holocaust survivors that write their own historical fiction on the subject. For example, Imre Kertesz, a Hungarian survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald is known for his historical fiction on the subject, including but not limited to *Fatelessness*, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* and *Liquidation*. *Fatelessness*, which was first penned in 1975 and translated by Tim Wilkinson into English in 2004, follows fictional Gyorgy Koves who, like Keretsz, was taken into Nazi custody on his way to work, was roughly the same age as Keretsz during his internment and followed the same path of the camps from Auschwitz to Buchenwald to various subcamps. Koves, like Keretsz, eventually makes his way back to Budapest. The book itself explores themes of survival and happiness in the camps, but makes no qualms about the fact that Koves is based on, but is not Kertesz. This book is not a

biography; however it was written by a survivor of the camps, making the book much more authentic as comparable to fiction written by someone who was never interned in Auschwitz. As such, the book follows a fictional character through the same situations as Kertesz and fact versus fiction would be impossible to decipher without knowing Kertesz's actual narrative. In this way, the book allows people a gateway into the time period through the fictional eyes of Koves in a realistic manner, where facts are indecipherable from fiction. Kertesz's goal was to create a character completely detached from the tragedy, which allowed him to ruminate his own experiences in totally honestly, something he may not have been able to do if he had been writing from the first person. At the end of the book, the fictional Koves states, "Yes, the next time I am asked, I ought to speak about that, the happiness of the concentration camps."<sup>2</sup> This is a perspective that may have been trampled upon and highly controversial had Kertesz stated this in a work of non-fiction. By disguising himself Koves and taking on another persona, Kertesz is able to express what could be his true opinions, or the true opinions of others who shared his experience. The book was subsequently made into a Hungarian film of the same name (or sometimes referred to as simply *Fateless*) in 2006, which is reported to incorporate more of Kertesz's actual experience than contained in the book.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kertesz, Imre. *Fatelessness*. Trans. Tim Wilkinson. (New York: Random House, 2004), 262.

<sup>3</sup> *Fateless*. Dir. Lajos Koltai. Perf. Marcell Nagy, Béla Dóra, Bálint Péntek, Áron Dimény, Peter Fancsikai. Velocity/Think Films, 2006. DVD.

It is no surprise that a subject as horrific as the Holocaust would elicit historical fiction that would cause controversy. In 2010, Young Adult author Sharon Dogar published a book called *Annexed*, a speculative fictional book about the time Anne Frank and her family spent in hiding. Dogar's *Annexed* is told entirely from the perspective of Peter van Pels (who was given the code name Van Daan in Anne's account). Anne's story has since become iconic since its original publishing in 1947, yielding several live action films, at least two Broadway incarnations and a Japanese cartoon. Her diary is often used in elementary and secondary classrooms as a way to make the Holocaust personal, a way for students to "connect" to a victim on a more intimate level. Anne writes about the mundane qualities of her life, such as starting her period, her feelings for Peter and fights with her parents, such things that make her "come alive" and relatable to the millions of teenagers who read her story. While any information about Anne or the other members of the "secret annex" (excepting her father, Otto, who survived the Holocaust) after their arrest is completely speculative, several pieces of art have attempted to tell the story. Melissa Muller's 1998 *Anne Frank: The Biography* includes information from those claiming to have seen Anne in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and even presents a compelling case for a suspect who may have betrayed the members of the "secret annex". The 2001 film *Anne Frank: The Whole Story* attempts to dramatize the events, as told in Muller's book, including the betrayal of the families by the cleaning lady, Lena Hartog.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that much of the second half of the film, including the betrayal, is

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<sup>4</sup> *Anne Frank: The Whole Story*. Dir. Robert Dornhelm. Perf. Ben Kingsley, Brenda Blethyn, Hannah Taylor-Gordon, and Tatjana Blacher. Buena Vista, 2001. DVD.

speculative, it was heralded by Golden Globe and received Emmy nominations for several of the actors. In addition, it was honored with the 2001 Emmy for "Outstanding Series".

However, Dogar's book, *Annexed* has not been as welcomed as *Anne Frank: The Whole Story* or the Muller's book. Although thoroughly researched to include as much truth in Peter's narrative as possible, the book has been denounced by the Anne Frank Foundation. Buddy Elias, Anne's closest surviving relative and advocate, stated in June 2010 in the London *Sunday Times* as quoted by *The Telegraph* "I [also] do not think that their terrible destiny should be used to invent some fictitious story."<sup>5</sup> His strong views against the book are shared by many who find the content questionable, as Sharon Dogar includes scenes of the teens engaging in sexual activity and speculation of Peter van Pels' sexual fantasies. Although Elias further claims in the 2010 *Telegraph* article that Dogar gave Peter "a character he didn't possess", which is based on his own speculation from stories told to him by Otto Frank. Dogar claims it is a matter of interpretation. She admits in the same *Telegraph* article that some of her book is "pure conjecture", but her book strives to use Frank's story as a vehicle to interest teens in the Holocaust (Leach, "'Sexing Up' of Anne Frank angers Holocaust victim's family"). Mal Peet, a book reviewer for *The Guardian's* online magazine, said of the book, "We should grieve for her more, rather than less, if she was murdered before she experienced [life]. The zealous, self-

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<sup>5</sup> Leach, Ben. "'Sexing Up' of Anne Frank Angers Holocaust Victim's Family." *The London Telegraph*. The London Telegraph. 20 Jun. 2010. Web. 27 Sept. 2010.

appointed guardians of her memory should be grateful to Dogar rather than outraged." Peet even criticizes Dogar for her copious use of footnotes to tell the audience where she begins to depart from history and goes into her own speculation, wishing that the book would speak for itself (Peet, "Annexed by Sharon Dogar").<sup>6</sup> However, this begs the question: would casual readers become confused by the departure and take it as truth, or are artists not trusting their audience enough? Besides, what is historical account but mere conjecture? As a diarist, Anne Frank is not a reliable narrator as the story is told solely from her perspective and using her bias. As such, all facts cannot be totally corroborated since we are seeing her story through a limited lens. Although conjecture, Dogar's story and Muller's biography may actually round out Anne and help readers and historians get a broader view of Anne's life and tragic demise. A conjecture is an educated guess, meaning that it is based on some fact and therefore, it is difficult to discount Dogar's opinion of Peter as it was carefully crafted after quite a bit of research. Dogar also states in the Preface of *Annexed* that Otto Frank publicly stated that the Anne in the diary is not the Anne he knew, although she does not cite when or where he said this.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, assuming Otto Frank did publicly state this, it is possible to say that his version, and subsequently Buddy Elias' version of Peter van Pels, is also not completely accurate either.

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<sup>6</sup> Peet, Mal. "Annexed by Sharon Dogar." *The Guardian*. The Guardian. 18 Sept 2010. Web. 27 Sept. 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Dogar, Sharon. *Annexed*. (London: Andersen Press Limited, 2010), v.

An interesting case study of historical fiction, made into both a play and film is Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone*, based on heavily on the book *Auschwitz: Doctor's Eyewitness Account* by Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian doctor assisting Dr. Mengele. It was printed in English in 1993. The story makes fiction out of fact, telling the story of the 12th Sonderkommando of Auschwitz that chose to revolt and blow up one of the crematoria and render another useless on October 7, 1944. The film and play are based on a few primary sources, namely Primo Levi's iconic The Drowned and Saved (the chapter "The Gray Zone" is where Nelson acquired the name of his piece) and Nyiszli's book.

Primo Levi describes the Sonderkommando's position as such:

It was their task to maintain order among new arrivals (often completely unaware of the destiny awaiting them), who were sent to the gas chambers to extract the corpses from the chambers, to pull gold teeth from jaws, to cut women's hair, to sort and classify clothes, shoes, and the contents of the luggage, to transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens, to extract and eliminate the ashes.<sup>8</sup>

This provides an interesting moral dilemma, as Levi also states, corroborated by Nyiszli's work, that those working in the unit received special status among the prisoners and therefore preferential treatment. They were able to sleep in semi-comfortable beds with blankets and mattresses, had their pick of food and were able

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<sup>8</sup> Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and Saved*. Trans. Simon & Schuster. (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 50.

to wear civilian garb instead of the rags the other prisoners were forced to wear. However, such a narrative proves problematic; there aren't a lot of primary sources about the incident itself. All Sonderkommando units were killed after a period of four months and most of the "offenders" of the rebellion were hanged or shot in the back of the head, as described in Nyiszli's account.<sup>9</sup> As such, Nyiszli's work is one of the only ways to corroborate this information as Dr. Mengele's assistants were "officially" referred to as part of the Sonderkommando, even though little information was shared with Nyiszli concerning the revolt. Levi states in his "Gray Zone" chapter of *The Drowned and Saved*, "The information about this exploit [the revolt] that has come down to us is neither complete or without contradictions."<sup>10</sup>

Nyiszli's account does not offer up the names of any of those involved in the Sonderkommando unit and presents himself in his work as uninvolved with the revolt. In his account, he talks of being asked to lay on his stomach as the SS began to shoot the "offending" parties,<sup>11</sup> but getting a reprieve from Mengele himself because he and his colleagues (who are not portrayed in either the play or film) were busy working on autopsy reports for Mengele.<sup>12</sup> The only people called out by name in *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* happen to be members of the SS:

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<sup>9</sup> Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. Trans. Richard Seaver. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1960), 159-160.

<sup>10</sup> Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and Saved*. Trans. Simon & Schuster. (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 51.

<sup>11</sup> Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. Trans. Richard Seaver. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1960), 159.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

Moll, Mussfeldt and Mengele. Moll and Mussfeld appear as characters in both the film and play, with Mengele mentioned in the play<sup>13</sup> and shown in the film.<sup>14</sup>

Nyiszli does not outright say in his account that he was mistrusted by the Sonderkommando as a reason for not knowing much about the event. His character in Act II Scene Four of the play and in a similar scene in the film, states that he doesn't know much information because of his close ties with Mengele and Mussfeld and the other prisoners' suspicion because of his work with the two high ranking officers. Since Nyiszli's book is the one of the only primary sources regarding the 12<sup>th</sup> Sonderkommando, it is the arguably closest anyone will ever get to knowing the actual truth of what happened. However, it is obvious by both reading Nyiszli's account and studying the play and movie that the information Nyiszli received regarding the revolt as watered down and full of holes. Nyiszli's account wasn't necessarily written to discuss the rebellion, which makes it even more difficult for someone writing historical fiction on the subject to piece everything together with pristine historical accuracy.

Nyiszli seemed to write the book as a day-to-day narrative of his life in Auschwitz and the revolt was treated as something that simply "happened" while he was interned there. Nyiszli himself is an unreliable narrator, as is Anne Frank, since everything is only from his point of view. Interestingly enough, Nyiszli writes an

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<sup>13</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. *The Grey Zone*. (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1998.)

<sup>14</sup> *The Grey Zone*. Dir. Tim Blake Nelson. Perf. David Arquette, Harvey Keitel, Mira Sorvino, David Chandler, and Steve Buscemi. LionsGate, 2003. DVD.

account that is very disconnected. Although he does not talk of the camp with nostalgia or describe the "happy times" in the camp, his narrative is almost similar in style to Fateless, in that he is totally detached, disconnected and almost lacking in emotion. This is contrary to his portrayal in both of Nelson's works. In Act II Scene 7, Nyiszli asks the SS Officer Mussfeld to kill him and vomits when he is told he must continue his work. As such, Nyiszli reacts similarly after the revolt in the film, even asserting to the other members of the Sonderkommando that he does not wish to live through Auschwitz. Nyiszli's account seems not to mention this, but instead he states that he is heartsick and vows never to practice as a doctor again, a promise he followed through on until his death in 1951.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Nelson acknowledges Nyiszli's detached attitude and states in the director's notes (meant for the cast and crew to read at the beginning of filming and published with the script for general consumption in 2003) that the real Dr. Nyiszli is less interesting to Nelson than the Nyiszli he created. Nelson also states that he feels like he has made Nyiszli a much more sympathetic character than he actually was in his book.<sup>16</sup>

Because Nyiszli's book is focused on himself, as any personal account would be, Tim Blake Nelson takes it upon himself to invent thin backstories and names for the members of the Sonderkommando. Basing the characters of members of the of the Sonderkommando on *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, (a book that appears to be, at

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<sup>15</sup> Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. Trans. Richard Seaver. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1960), 220, 222.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. *The Grey Zone: Director's Notes and Screenplay*. (New York: New Market Press, 2003), 156.

this time, inaccessible to the general public and held in Auschwitz's library), which contains manuscripts and diaries of Sonderkommando held at Auschwitz, Nelson invents Hoffman (largely based on Polish Sonderkommando Salmen Lewenthal's diaries), Rosenthal, Schlermer and Abramowics. However, it is apparent in both the film and theatrical version that their backstories are not as relevant as the dilemma that Nelson presents to them: the idea that they will be killed in the next few weeks and only have a short amount of time to organize and follow through with a revolt. Knowing their privileged status can help render a killing machine inoperable, they must decide to kill or be killed. The characters are distinguishable between each other only by their position on the revolt and how they react to the idea of their impending death. In Hoffman's monologue in the film, he states, "It's so easy to forget who we were before... who we'll never be again."<sup>17</sup>, which helps understand the choice to develop the characters out more than they were. Backstories are revealed through simple monologues and in talking to The Girl (who's character will be touched upon in a moment). The stories of the characters' lives are simple, each of them coming from Hungary, a couple with wives, some with family members, other discussing where they are from in Budapest. Nelson decides not to focus on the lives of the characters before Auschwitz, which provides an interesting insight into the world of the Sonderkommando. In a way, it shows, without saying, that in order to go about their work, the men have to shed the identities they once had. They are but ghosts of their former selves. The real Nyiszli, in a way, is not his

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<sup>17</sup> *The Grey Zone*. Dir. Tim Blake Nelson. Perf. David Arquette, Harvey Keitel, Mira Sorvino, David Chandler, and Steve Buscemi. LionsGate, 2003. DVD.

former self either, which is apparent by his detached prose and his lack of discussion on his life before Auschwitz in his memoirs.

The Girl is also a pivotal character in the action of both the play and film. Although a real person, her name was never recorded, and thus she is given the name "The Girl". Nelson took the The Girl from Nyiszli's account and made her into a much more important character than she was in history. Nyiszli describes his brush with the girl:

"Doctor," he [the chief of the gas chamber kommando] said, "come quickly. We just found a girl alive at the bottom of the pile of the corpses."

I grabbed my instrument case, which was always ready, and dashed to the gas chamber. Against the wall, near the entrance of the immense room, half covered with other bodies, I saw a girl in the throes of a death-rattle, her body seized with convulsions. The gas kommando men around me were in a state of panic. Nothing like this had happened in the course of their horrible career.<sup>18</sup>

Both Nelson's works have the girl being found on the same day as the Sonderkommando uprising, making her a convenient plot device. In both of Nelson's versions, the girl is comatose, rendered mute by the trauma she's endured. The Sonderkommando try to talk to her, as does Mussfeld, but ultimately she provides

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<sup>18</sup> Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. Trans. Richard Seaver. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1960), 114-115.

no answers, only sitting staring at those around her with wide eyes. However, Nyiszli asserts in his account that he actually talked to her. The Girl told Nyiszli that she was from Transylvania, had come to Auschwitz with her parents and she was 16 years old.<sup>19</sup> Nelson chooses to keep her silent (except for one line in the play, telling Moll to shoot her) and does not give her a name.

While a pivotal plot point in Nelson's work, *The Girl* is rather a footnote in Nyiszli's account. In both the play and film, Hoffman reveals much of his character to *The Girl* while the Sonderkommando keep her hidden, trying to decide what to do with her. He also presents some of the central themes of the work to her, including his moral dilemma, feeling safe with her because she is silent and possibly unable to comprehend what he is saying. Hoffman reveals the main conflict of the play in Act II Scene 3 to *The Girl*'s silence by discussing the women on the other side of the fence with whom he fraternizes. He goes on to talk about how a man on his way to the gas chambers refused to give him his watch after he accused Hoffman of collaborating with the Nazis and assisting with their work of annihilating the Jews. Hoffman recounts how he then beat the man to death, but let the man keep the watch. He then took the man's watch by trading it for gold with another member of the Sonderkommando. He also tells the girl about the man who was forced to put his family in the ovens, describing him as one of his neighbors. Subsequently, the man tried to kill himself with an overdose of sleeping pills and was revived by Nyiszli, a story corroborated in Nyiszli's account.<sup>20</sup> Since the film allows the actors to act out

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

the scenes Hoffman merely describes in the play, Hoffman's monologue to The Girl is a little different in the movie, and perhaps a bit more telling. He describes the Sonderkommando's dilemma, saving himself at the expense of others in the following monologue and man's extreme will to survive, delivered in the film by David Arquette:

I used to think so much of myself... What I'd make of my life. We can't know what we're capable of, any of us. How can you know what you'd do to stay alive, until you're really asked? I know this now. For most of us, the answer... is anything. It's so easy to forget who we were before... who we'll never be again. There was this old man, he pushed the carts, and on our first day, when we had to burn our own convoy, his wife was brought up on the elevator. Then his daughter... and then both his grandchildren. I knew him. We were neighbors. And in 20 minutes, his whole family, and all its future, was gone from this earth. Two weeks later, he took pills and was revived. We smothered him with his own pillow, and now I know why. You can kill yourself. That's the only choice. I want them to save you. I want them to save you more than I want anything. I pray to God we save you.<sup>21</sup>

As mentioned previously, The Girl is but a footnote in Nyiszli's account. In the play, she is shot in the head by Moll in Act II Scene 6 after Nyiszli tries to convince Mussfeld to let her live, using what little information he knows of the revolt as

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<sup>21</sup> *The Grey Zone*. Dir. Tim Blake Nelson. Perf. David Arquette, Harvey Keitel, Mira Sorvino, David Chandler, and Steve Buscemi. LionsGate, 2003. DVD.

collateral. The movie shows her being shot by an SS officer (at this point we cannot see who fired the shot as the camera is in her Point of View upon her death) after she has witnessed the revolt and the subsequent shooting of the Sonderkommando unit. In reality, The Girl was shot in the head by Mussfeld in front of the furnace after a brief argument over what to do with her, indeed, between Mussfeld and Nyiszli. Although the Sonderkommando did know of her existence, she was not a pivotal symbol of life, the revolt and the families that the members of the Sonderkommando may have been fighting for.

The Girl is also used as a symbol for Nyiszli's daughter who was 15 at the time of her internment in Auschwitz. His account tells of him receiving a special pass from Mengele for the sole purpose of being able to move about the camp to find his wife and daughter. Eventually, he does find them and writes that he was able to smuggle them food, supplies and extra blankets, even enough to share with fellow inmates. Using his authority, Nyiszli was able to see that they were transferred away from Auschwitz, but had no knowledge of their whereabouts again until after the war.<sup>22</sup> In the final scene of the play, The Girl takes on the identity of his daughter for a few lines, then finally saying to the audience, "He has saved her. He'll try not to think of those who die in her place, of those who die in his, but seeing the living will always remind him of the dead."<sup>23</sup> Not only does she symbolize his daughter and to a

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<sup>22</sup> Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. Trans. Richard Seaver. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1960), 137-149.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. *The Grey Zone*. (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1998.)

lesser extent, the families of the Sonderkommando, but also all of those who died in Auschwitz, who they were unable to save.

Although both the film and play focus on the uprising of the 12<sup>th</sup> Sonderkommando, Nelson is quite frank in the director's notes, that he does not want the film to be viewed as an "uprising film": "I couldn't be less interested in this movie being identified as an 'uprising film.' That said, the attempted rebellion, and its tension with Nyiszli's story and that of the Girl, does drive the story; without the rebellion, the movie's but a bleak portrait of the 12<sup>th</sup> Sonderkommando, and I dare say it would have no audience. The trick then is not to play the uprising for its heroism. The rebellion itself should feel haphazard, clumsy and poorly organized, as it probably was."<sup>24</sup>

The play speaks very little of the women's involvement in the rebellion. Their role was instrumental in the real life rebellion, although poorly and sparsely documented. Nyiszli talks about the Sonderkommando's interactions with the women "on the other side of the fence."<sup>25</sup> He describes the women as sickly road workers who were given spoils that the Sonderkommando had access to (presumably from the luggage pilfered from dead Jews and prisoners). The Sonderkommando gave the SS guards cigarettes in order to give the women food and clothing. Although Nyiszli says there is never any favoritism among them,

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<sup>24</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. (*The Grey Zone: Director's Notes and Screenplay*. New York: New Market Press, 2003), 158-159.

<sup>25</sup> Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. Trans. Richard Seaver. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1960), 76.

Hoffman tells the The Girl in the theatrical version of Tim Blake Nelson's script that he fell in love with one of them. In Act II Scene 3, he tells her, "I'm in love with a girl like you. In another part of the camp where we can't go. We bring them things we get a hold of. Clothes. Cigarettes. Tins of food."<sup>26</sup>

In Nelson's play, the women are merely mentioned, as they are in Nyiszli's work, simply women on the other side of the fence to whom they sometimes give their spoils. Although there is little "hard" evidence from primary sources of their existence, it has been recorded by witnesses that several women in their early 20s were part of the rebellion by smuggling explosives from the factory where they worked to members of the Sonderkommando. Without these explosives, the complete annihilation of the crematoria would never have been possible.

In the introduction of *Women in the Resistance and Holocaust*, the editor of the book and writer of this section, Vera Laska, gives one of the key female figures of the Sonderkommando rebellion simply one sentence. Rosa Robota, the woman thought to have been in charge of the smuggling operation, is credited in the annals of history for helping blow up the crematorium at Auschwitz.<sup>27</sup> There is little concrete information on Polish-born Robota, but Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies reports that she was one of the first women sent to Birkenau

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<sup>26</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. *The Grey Zone*. (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1998.)

<sup>27</sup> Laska, Vera, ed. *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voice of Eyewitnesses*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 10.

in 1942 and joined a resistance group in Auschwitz in 1943.<sup>28</sup> Conflicting reports exist as to her actual birth date, but most sources, including Yad Vashem, cite her as 23 at the time of her death. Along with three other women, Rosa was questioned and tortured in conjunction with the rebellion and what she knew of the underground resistance in the camp. Yad Vashem states that she never gave up any information and was killed by public hanging on January 6, 1945, along with the other women who aided her.

The women take on a role of their own in the Nelson's film version of *The Grey Zone*, in the incarnations of characters named Rosa, Dina and Anja. Nelson admits to naming the character Rosa after Rosa Robota, but only in homage and not in character. Nelson, contrary to Yad Vashem, cites Robota as age 21 at the time of her death.<sup>29</sup> His director's notes make it apparent that he does not try to make the women heroes or likable, and instead describes the Rosa he created as "unnervingly callous". In addition, Nelson admits to altering history for a dramatic device. Instead of being tortured and then hanged, the characters in the film are tortured and then sent to stand outside as the women from their barracks are lined up and shot one by one. The SS ask both Dina and Anja where they got the gunpowder and who they were giving it to, before shooting a prisoner when the SS receive no answer. Driven

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<sup>28</sup> "Rosa Robota." *Yad Vashem.org*. Shoah Resource Center, International School for Holocaust Studies. n.d. Web. 27 Sept. 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. *The Grey Zone: Director's Notes and Screenplay*. (New York: New Market Press, 2003), 158.

mad by the shootings, Dina flings herself on the electrified fence and Anja takes the SS officer's gun to shoot herself.<sup>30</sup>

The ending of the film and play both feature a monologue by The Girl, in which she eerily narrates her death and experience of watching herself turning into ashes through the ovens. She explains how the work continues, even after the revolt, offering a bit of insight into how people were able to do what many of us removed from the situation would deem unthinkable. Knowing that she was a real person perhaps gives the monologue an extra layer of depth. Her Act II Scene 7 monologue is delivered as a voice over in the film as the actors act out the new group burning the 12<sup>th</sup> Sonderkommando unit. In the play, she is alone on stage, the audience completely focused on her as she says:

After the revolt, half of the ovens remain, and I catch fire quickly. I'm thrown in clumsily because it's a new group. Some of the men cry, but they do the work, and they learn easily. The first part of me rises in dense smoke that mingles with the smoke of others. Then there are the bones, which settle in ash, and these are swept up to be carried to the river. And last, bits of our dust, that simply float there in air beside the workings of the men. These bits of dust are grey. We settle on their shoes and on their faces and in their lungs, and they become so used to us that soon they don't cough and don't

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

brush us away. At this point they're just moving. Breathing and moving, like anyone else still alive in that place. And this is how the work continues.<sup>31</sup>

Also worthy of note is the style Nelson chose to portray these grim events. The set of the play is simple: a concrete floor, sconces on the wall and a steel door, representing the gas chamber on an overhead traveling track. The action all takes place without elaborate set changes. Violence in the play is kept to a minimum. It is almost Grecian in its minimalism; describing acts of extreme violence (i.e. killing hundreds of people at once, people being pushed into crematoriums, shootings and Hoffman's beating of the man with the watch to death) without actually ever showing them. In fact, when The Girl is shot by Moll in the play, there is a cue for the explosion to happen at the same time, distracting the audience from her death. Of course, the level of violence in this piece can be up to the discretion director who chooses to take on the play, but it is written in stark contrast to the amount of violence in the movie.

Nyiszli goes into great detail when describing the deception of the incoming prisoners as they arrived in Auschwitz. The cloakroom with numbered hooks, the orders to get into a "bath" and the way the doomed clamored to the top of the room as gas rose is there. Nyiszli even goes so far as to discuss the fact that those who drown or die from poison gas commit an act of involuntary defecation before they die, causing the Sonderkommando units to clean up the "scene" by first spraying the

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<sup>31</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. *The Grey Zone*. (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1998.)

corpses down with hoses. The Sonderkommando then picking up the dead to further desecrate their bodies by cutting their hair and ripping out their gold teeth, presumably for German use.<sup>32</sup> While Nelson's approach in the play is that of minimalism, the movie is a no-holds barred, accurate portrayal of Auschwitz. Audiences are given no reprieve to the violence as they watch actors playing prisoners being trapped in the gas chamber, being sprayed clean and then exploited by having their hair and teeth ripped from their bodies. Nelson doesn't even leave out the detail of defecation upon death, for the walls of the gas chambers are clearly splattered with what is made to look like human feces. The film even shows its audience the scenes of the torture of the women, or watching the act of the Sonderkommando deposit the dead into the ovens. The scene in which Hoffman talks about his neighbor putting his family into the ovens to *The Girl in the play*, is actually played out in real-time in front of the audience, not giving them a buffer of words to to imagine such horror, but forcing them to bear witness to it.<sup>33</sup>

The color-scheme of the film is almost black-and-white, without having been shot as such. Color is virtually absent as the Sonderkommando are covered in gray ashes and working in a cement-like underground lair. The dark-brown and green officer's uniforms add to the palate of colorlessness. The three women, who together represent Rosa Robota and her group, wear make-up made to make them look dirty

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<sup>32</sup> Nyiszli, Dr. Miklos. *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. Trans. Richard Seaver. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1960), 49-55.

<sup>33</sup> *The Grey Zone*. Dir. Tim Blake Nelson. Perf. David Arquette, Harvey Keitel, Mira Sorvino, David Chandler, and Steve Buscemi. LionsGate, 2003. DVD.

and disheveled, giving them a colorless pallor as well. Although from studying pictures of the prisoners, the camp can be seen as completely devoid of color, Nelson makes no attempt to capture things that may have actually been colorful in the camp. He calls attention to color a few times, such as the faces of jaundice workers and the chairs and couches brought to Auschwitz by prisoners or ransacked from homes that sat on the lawn outside the Crematoria for the Sonderkommando to use at their discretion. The grim nature of the film has rendered what some call "unwatchable", as Nelson quotes an unnamed critic in a 2003 forward of the director's version of the script.<sup>34</sup>

Some historians and audience members alike may discount such films and likewise, books such as *Annexed* because they contain nonfacts and even speculation to round out the characters and make the narratives complete. However, as we have discussed throughout this paper, it is evident that not enough information exists about the revolt or Rosa Robota and the group of women who smuggled in explosives to create a strong, reliable narrative. Likewise, although there is evidence in primary sources about the life of Peter van Pels in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, there is not enough information about his life before or after their time together to provide an accurate picture of him from beginning to end. This is where imagination and supposition have to come together to fill the plot holes in order to create a narrative that actually makes sense.

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<sup>34</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. (*The Grey Zone: Director's Notes and Screenplay*. New York: New Market Press, 2003), xvii.

Many who read Holocaust literature or see films about the Holocaust beg the question, "Why didn't they [Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, priests] fight back?". The answer is that they did, however there isn't a wealth of information to provide interesting enough narratives about actual historical figures. For instance, one of the heroines of Auschwitz, Mala Zimetbaum is described in Fania Fenelon's *Playing for Time* and *Anus Mundi: 1,500 Days in Auschwitz/Birkeanu* by Wieslaw Kielar as having escaped Auschwitz with her boyfriend, Edek Galinski. They were both captured in Slovakia and made to return to Auschwitz where they both were killed after extensive torture.<sup>35</sup> An article exists in the *Idea Journal*, a peer-reviewed scholastic journal on the Holocaust and other massacres called *Mala's Last Words* by Stephen G. Esrati. Through his various research and using a wide variety of primary sources, it is difficult for Esrati to tell what Mala's last words were. While all of his sources agree that Mala was dragged in front of the women at roll call, bloody and half-naked, no primary source agrees on what her last words were or whether they were shouted to the women or in confidence to a small group.<sup>36</sup> But because there isn't a plethora of information on the topic, or that there are bits and pieces to a story and not a full, clearly defined narrative, it shouldn't be withheld. Likely, many people would not have known about the Sonderkommando revolt of Auschwitz

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<sup>35</sup> Fenelon, Fania. (*Playing for Time*. Trans. Marcelle Routier. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 162-168.

<sup>36</sup> Esrati, Steve G. "Mala's Last Words." *The Idea Journal: A Journal of Social Issues* 3.1: n. pag. Web. 1 Jan. 1998.

without *The Grey Zone*. And unless a famous work is made on Mala Zimetbaum, she may remain a footnote in history, as she is now, known only to Holocaust scholars.

Nelson refutes such critics of historical fiction by stating in his Introduction to the Director's edition of the film script of *The Grey Zone*, "If we are to be serious about our work, and what we'd prefer is to examine the human condition through fictional or quasi-fictional narrative, then it seems to me it is precisely toward events like the Holocaust that we should gravitate."<sup>37</sup> He continues on the next page with, "This theme, whatever the aesthetic context, however difficult the choices, must remain our guiding principle."<sup>38</sup>

Although some watching Holocaust films and reading speculative fictional books may mistake them as real, is that really as bad as people never exploring the issue or ruminating on the moral dilemmas these events create? Artists should trust their audiences. Without art and historical speculation and historical fiction, history would cease to be alive to the person who has not decided to take great interest in the event and delve into primary sources. By reading such speculative fiction, many find themselves thinking about dilemmas they may never face, and thus examining and re-examining their morals, values and the human condition itself.

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<sup>37</sup> Nelson, Tim Blake. (*The Grey Zone: Director's Notes and Screenplay*. New York: New Market Press, 2003), xiv.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

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