



The Last Checkmate

William Morrow Paperbacks

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ISBN: 9780063141933

Introduction

Readers of Heather Morris's *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and watchers of *The Queen's Gambit* won't want to miss this amazing debut set during World War II. A young Polish resistance worker, imprisoned in Auschwitz as a political prisoner, plays chess in exchange for her life, and in doing so fights to bring the man who destroyed her family to justice.

Maria Florkowska is many things: daughter, avid chess player, and, as a member of the Polish underground resistance in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, a young woman brave beyond her years. Captured by the Gestapo, she is imprisoned in Auschwitz, but while her family is sent to their deaths, she is spared. Realizing her ability to play chess, the sadistic camp deputy, Karl Fritzsich, decides to use her as a chess opponent to entertain the camp guards. However, once he tires of exploiting her skills, he has every intention of killing her.

Befriended by a Catholic priest, Maria attempts to overcome her grief, vows to avenge the murder of her family, and plays for her life. For four grueling years, her strategy is simple: Live. Fight. Survive. By cleverly provoking Fritzsich's volatile nature in front of his superiors, Maria intends to orchestrate his downfall. Only then will she have a chance to evade the fate awaiting her and see him punished for his wickedness.

As she carries out her plan and the war nears its end, she challenges her former nemesis to one final game, certain to end in life or death, in failure or justice. If Maria can bear to face Fritzsich—and her past—one last time.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the theme of chess utilized throughout the story. How does it influence Maria's worldview? Her efforts to survive Auschwitz? The way she relates to others? Does this outlook help her, hinder her, or both? She often views herself as a pawn; does she find this to be a positive association? A negative one? Both? Can you think of another example when art was used as a means of survival during a dark time in history?
 2. Maria Florkowska; Helena Pilarczyk; Prisoner 16671; shikse. Maria receives many different names throughout the course of the story. How do her circumstances impact the name with which she most closely identifies or the way she views her other names, and what affect does each name have on her view of herself? What about Irena and Hania and the names they utilize throughout the story?
 3. How does the structure of *The Last Checkmate* impact the reading experience? As the confrontation between Maria and Fritzsich progresses, how does the structure highlight its effects on Maria, her confidence regarding her ability to handle this confrontation, and her mental and emotional state?
 4. Maria, Hania, and Irena each have very different experiences that lead them to the concentration camp. How have those experiences shaped their efforts to survive the war, their impressions of one another, and their initial interactions? As women, what sort of struggles do they face that differ from their male counterparts, especially for Maria and Hania when they are, at first, the only two women in Auschwitz? What changes in these women's relationships and enables them not only to become each other's family, but to remain so even after the war? Why do you think female friendships are so unique and profound?
 5. Discuss the role of religion and faith throughout the story. How does her experience in Auschwitz challenge Maria's Catholic faith, and how do her beliefs impact her efforts to survive? Father Kolbe's? How does the SS feel about religion? Hania and Izaak are Jewish; how do you think Nazi persecution has impacted their faith? Despite their religious differences, what are some ways that faith unites Maria and Hania?
 6. Live. Fight. Survive. This is the mantra Maria adopts following Father Kolbe's counsel, and her struggle to do so becomes even more severe given Auschwitz's impacts on her mental health. Discuss the role of mental health in the story for Maria, her friends, and survivors. For inmates, often psychological torment was worse than physical; how does Auschwitz experience torment them mentally and what are some ways the SS guards—especially Fritzsich—psychologically torture Maria and other prisoners? Compare and contrast Maria's mental and emotional state upon arriving at Auschwitz for the first time, then when she decides to fight for survival, and when she meets Fritzsich for their final confrontation. What do you learn about the struggles these characters face post-war? In *Man's Search For Meaning*, Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl identifies three phases of an
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- inmate's mental reaction to camp life; can you pinpoint moments when Maria, Hania, or another character experiences these phases?
- a. Phase 1: admission – symptoms include shock, a fundamental curiosity of their strange circumstances, strange or morbid sense of humor, detachment, and suicidal thoughts or actions
 - b. Phase 2: relative apathy – emotional death – prisoners blunt their emotions, as they cause too much mental agony which is far more severe than physical pain; instead they focus only on primitive instincts and survival for themselves and/or their friends
 - c. Phase 3: post-liberation – relieved but not joyful; concepts like freedom are impossible to grasp and have lost all meaning since the prisoner has been separated from the world for so long, so they experience disillusionment, detachment, and bitterness
7. The Holocaust is defined as the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945 (United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum). As a non-Jew, Maria is not a victim of the Holocaust, hence why I respectfully ask you to remember this distinction and to think of her as what she was: a member of the Polish resistance who was caught and punished for her work. It is estimated that at least 1.3 million people were sent to Auschwitz and that nearly 1.1 million of them were Jews; it is also estimated that 1.1 million people died, and of that total, roughly 960,000 were Jews. How do you think an evil of this magnitude was allowed to happen? Has this book taught you anything new about the concentration camp experience, its effects on survivors, or WWII history? Today, many people deny that the Holocaust ever happened, cannot name any of the camps, and/or cannot name the total number of people killed during the Holocaust. What can you do to educate others, make sure evils like this never happen again, and ensure this history is never forgotten?
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