

Treatment Colette

Arnošt Lustig is one of the world's most renowned literary authors of our times. Lustig's novel *Colette* draws on the author's personal Nazi Concentration Camp experience and his own recollection of several escape attempts from the hell of the Auschwitz. The Pulitzer Prize nominated author, in cooperation with a writer/director Milan Cieslar, tells - in pure language of film - a tale, of the power of love under extreme life circumstances. It is a story of a man and his vigorous determination to escape from a hopeless life condition and his courage to face death.

The story begins in 1995, when a septuagenarian writer Willie, who has lived in the United States for nearly fifty years, is invited by his son to come to his girlfriend's dinner party. By pure coincidence, he encounters mother of his son's girlfriend at the dinner. She is a woman who was his first love in a death camp. The two aging people who were once brought together by the faith now feel inexpressible distance between them.

Without revealing their secret to their children, Willie communicates, between the lines of the dinner conversation, to elderly, but still beautiful Colette that he was waiting for her after the war. When Willie returns home, he begins to write a story about a young, beautiful Belgian Jewish girl named Colette. The viewer is taken back in time to Auschwitz / Birkenau of the summer 1943 and sees it through Willie's eyes.

Auschwitz, at that time, was already overcrowded and bursting by masses of prisoners from all over the Europe. After the camp's typhus "selection" the men's Camp is relocated from Auschwitz to Birkenau, a sister camp about three kilometers away that was designed for liquidation of millions of Jews. A young Czech prisoner Willie takes advantage of the confusion of the move and uses his old acquaintance with a camp registrar to be transferred to a work squad, within the new campground known as Canada. It is a notorious place that sorts out and collates confiscated personal items from the prisoners who were brought by the transports. The spoils from the transports are to be used as a winter relieve for the belligerent Germany behind the front lines. Willie manages to make his way into the workshop, where there is enough food, but also a great danger. The prisoners of commandos, at the risk of cruel punishment and even death, steal and smuggle goods into the base camp in order to assure their own and their loved ones' survival. Auschwitz and Birkenau were the sites of the so-called organization, the largest trade exchange in the death camps.

During one of the transport debarkations Willie meets a beautiful Belgian, a graceful doe, whose life he saves. In an unguarded moment he tells to the lovely girl what to say in order to stay alive and not to end up in a crematorium like her parents. Colette listens to him and is the only one from the entire family to be spared from death. She is assigned to the limestone quarry, which would mean the certain death sentence by hard-labor. Again her beauty saves her.

She captures an eye of the commander of Canada Unterscharfuehrer Weissacker who is fascinated by her beauty. He sends another woman to her death just to vacate a place in the workshop for the beautiful Belgian Jew Colette. From the start Weissacker is possessed by Colette's captivating charm and her beauty, but it is a bond of a victim and an executioner, a perverse game of a cat and a mouse. Colette subconsciously feels that she will fall victim to his arbitrary behavior. A young, ambitious officer, who is shaped by the SS ideology, is intoxicated by his power over the life and death of his victim, who to him is a racially inferior being. The officer is more and more confused by his polarizing attraction to Colette.

Her race makes her a subject to his merciless treatment and inevitably condemns her to "final solution". It is only a matter of time and his will for her to be condemned. Being both sentenced to death, Willie and Colette grow close and fall in love.

Willie is forced by his capo to smuggle presents to a beautiful Viennese, capo Kordula. Weissacker is killing his time by watching the strange courtship of the two chosen inmates (capos) who supervise other prisoners. Willie who is their gofer takes a rap for them. He is caught with contraband when he smuggles it to Kordula and is sentenced to twenty-five lashes by cat-o'-nine-tails. Willie does not divulge for whom the gifts were intended. Beaten to blood he is carried to the camp. Thanks to his loyalty to his capo and his bravery he gets medical treatment and is operated in a prison hospital (warren).

The operation is successful, but there is no time for recovery. New patients flow into overcrowded hospital and those who are unable to go back to work immediately, end up with a phenol injection to the heart. Willie manages to return back to Canada. He can hardly walk, so his companions virtually carry him to Canada and hide him there. Colette takes care of ill Willie. Every day she brings a diamond that enables him to buy another day of life. Emotional attachment between Willie and Colette grows stronger. Willie regains his strength, but Weissacker discovers that he survived his punishment and orders him, along with the oldest prisoners, to the punishment squads outside the relative safety of Canada.

The survival of the prisoners in disciplinary squads, who expunge the Nazi atrocities, is determined by how much they witnessed. Those who destroyed traces of the atrocities are the most expendable. Willie, who is determined to escape his fate, meets with Czech prisoner, with whom he grew up in the Theresienstadt ghetto. Miraculously, he is admitted to a secret underground movement, and is privileged to perform in functions of a registrar. He escapes the clutches of a disciplinary task force.

Willie and Colette meet regularly. Their passionate, uninhibited sexual encounters and their animalistic sensuousness give them both the strength to survive the horrors of the camp. The camp steps up its irreplaceable role in the "final solution", the mass killings of Jews from all over the Europe. The summer of 1944 Auschwitz / Birkenau swallowed thousands of Hungarian Jews. The lovers decide to escape. Their plan is realistic. The German officers, in anticipation of military defeat, want to insure their financial future with gold and diamonds that circulate in the camp. To elicit diamonds from the prisoners the officers are willing to promise anything, even help to escape. Willie along with his fellow prisoners finds connection to an SS officer of the Slovak ancestry. In exchange for the diamonds he offers to smuggle two prisoners, hidden in a woodpile on the bed of his truck, pass the security guards. The daring plan becomes more and more realistic. Every single step of the dangerous plan calls for tremendous courage as any error that would result in disclosure is punishable by death. The viewer is witnessing a thrilling getaway preparation. The Nazis guard the death camp and its secrets from the entire world. Although it seems impossible for them to flee together, Willie does not want to leave Colette behind. As the plan of the escape becomes more complicated, the tension builds up so thick that one could slice it. Unexpectedly a transport from Lodz arrives in Canada, where Colette is working. The prisoners must work late into the night, but the scheduled escape time is nearing and Colette must take a risk.

Willie is anxiously waiting for Colette as a truck full of wood is ready to leave. The other escape participants don't want to wait even a minute longer. Colette runs to the gate of Canada, only to be intercepted by Weissacker. She carries a pass that will allow her to get into the morgue where the runaways are to meet according to the flight plan. Colette never makes it to the morgue. Instead Weissacker drags her into a barrack, where the fair-haired officer can no longer control himself and rapes her.

His laps of self-control sealed the fate of the girl. The officer, who feels embarrassed in front of himself and in front of Colette, wants to send the beautiful girl to a gas chamber. The only thing she would take to the eternity is her secret that she is withholding from him. The secret delays her death.

Willie must make his decision. It is now or never! Willie decides to stay because of Colette. During that moment he does not realize that he, thus unwittingly, saved his own life. At the last minute Willie swaps his and Colette's hiding place in the pile of wood with another prisoner. The SS officer smuggles the

runaways out of the camp, pockets all the gold and diamonds and shoots both of them to death. He later receives a promotion for his act of “bravery”.

All the evidence of the pass source points to Willie and he is interrogated. He does not reveal the secret of the underground movement. He is taken into a bunker, a cold concrete correction cell that is packed with so many prisoners that there is not enough room for them to stand and they are piled up on the top of each other. Here, the natural law rules, and only the strongest survive.

The front is getting near and Colette feels that her days and hours are numbered. Weissacker is intoxicated by tormenting her and keeps delaying the time of her death to make her suffer. Colette must reach deep inside of herself and gather all her strength to save herself. The price for a survival is high and she is doing whatever she can to stay alive at the cost of trauma that she would carry with her for the rest of her life. She must submit to the whim of all the people who could be instrumental in helping her to be included in the list of prisoners who are to be moved to another concentration camp in Sachsenhausen. Thanks to the uprising of the Sonderkommando prisoners Willie is released back to the barracks. The final evacuation of the camp is underway before the advancing Russian front. Willie and Colette keep missing each other.

Colette manages to leave with transport to Sachsenhausen and Willie starts a long winter evacuation from the camp. Weissacker is frantically looking for Colette who fled from him. He crosses paths with Willie, who falls behind in the crowd of prisoners and drags himself through the snow completely exhausted. Fatigued Willie and fanatical SS officer, who are both in love with Colette, rise against each other. The SS officer's Luger is out of the bullets and both men are struggling without weapons. Willie stabs and kills Weissacker with his own dagger.

Willie becomes a military correspondent. At the military celebration on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées he catches a glimpse of Colette, who pegged to the U.S. officer disappears into the crowd. The two lovers lost one another forever. They won't meet again until fifty years later. The passage of time and the shared experience of the horrors they both lived through bring them closer together and separate them at the same time.