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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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From Stigma to Medal of Honour? Auschwitz Tattoos and the Generational Change

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With time, my tattoo has become a part of my body. I do not display it and do not hide it. ... There are not many of us in the world to bear this witness.

This is how the award-winning documentary *Numbered* starts. Dana Doron and Uriel Sinai present the varying attitudes of a dozen survivors living in Israel who six decades earlier had received a number inked in their arms upon arrival in Auschwitz.

The film illustrates how the perception of the tattooed numbers changed over the decades. It is this changing attitude I will focus on by referring to observations made in the film and the documented photo series which resulted of the project, including some additional newspaper articles.

Furthermore, I will discuss the second and third generation's decision to take over their grandparents' number, and I will present some other examples from art and popular culture where Auschwitz numbers played a role. Instead of presenting answers I raise questions and look forward to a stimulating discussion!

At the beginning of the film, the survivors recount the selection process, how they had to undress, that their entire bodies were shaved, how they received the number. The survivors describe this process as stigmatizing: they felt that they were no human beings anymore but felt branded like cattle. It was a terrifying and painful procedure, which sometimes led to infections and fever. The survivors describe how they were reduced to numbers only, bereft of name, identity, family. These numbers were clearly a mark of dehumanization. But at the same time this mark meant a certain degree of security; as only those deemed fit for work received a number and had a chance of survival.

Those who survived had to live with this mark. How people dealt with it depended much on the changing attitudes towards the Holocaust of the surrounding Israeli society. Many survivors met in the post-war years with ignorance of what the figure meant. Others were subject to suspicion, as people believed that the bearers of the numbers did survive only at the expense of others. Consequently some decided to remove it, as Ruth e.g.. Other survivors did stop wearing short-sleeved shirts so that their numbers remained invisible.

For a long time many regarded the number as a reminder of their parents, of their war experiences, of all they had been through and what they had lost. To them the number was a scar. It may not have healed but still its meaning changed over time, as also the figures bleached over the years, some are hardly visible anymore.

During the decades public opinion towards the Holocaust changed and with it the survivors attitude towards the stigmatizing symbol: today some consider their own arm as a monument, the number as a medal of honor, especially child survivor Daniel. To him the number has developed into a sign of prestige which gives him some kind of superiority, he calls himself, semi-sarcastically, a celebrity.

A touching episode tells the story of Hanna who decided after her father's death to take over his number. Hanna is a middle-aged woman who had no previous tattoo but now felt the desire to etch her father's number into her skin, placed just above her ankle.

During all her life this number was tight to the family's daily routine; the figures had functioned as password for the safe and for the lock for their luggage. Hanna knew it in her sleep. Still, a few days after she got the tattoo she realized she had made a mistake: the number on her leg was not her father's. She couldn't believe it! How could this happen?

Hanna decides to get the number right. But tattooed numbers are difficult to change. The tattooist suggested covering the number with flowers, a butterfly or a colorful snake. But she objected: "No, it's the Holocaust after all!" The wrong number was replaced by simple dots; the correct number added under. Thereby the figures style was meant to look similar to the style of her father's; although Hanna did not believe that her father would have approved all this in the first place, and would have been angry about her mistake.

But the story does not end here: Worried about the wrong number she decided to find out who the owner of it. The findings make her sad: the number belonged to a young man, Maurice Finsi from the Netherlands, who died in Auschwitz in 1942, at the age of 30. Hanna feels as if she erased him twice and that now nothing was left of him.

At the end of the film we see the about 50 survivors interviewed for the film gathered together. Right before this *grande finale* we meet Avraham and his grandson Ayal, and I like to show this episode to you as it is such a telling scene:

FILM SEQUENCE

Indeed for some, the former sign of dehumanization developed over the decades into a symbol of survival, not only of an individual but as a seed of a new family, and even of a nation, the state of Israel.

From this sequence only it is hard to tell if Ayal's decision can be seen as an expression of generational trauma-transfer. In an article Ayal tells it was after a trip to Argentina where he saw cattle branded that he decided to become a vegetarian and to get the tattoo. Ayal did not ask his grandfather for permission. To him the number expresses an inheritance; it's rather personal but he understands that some may experience it as provocative.

When I told Holocaust researchers of different professions what I was currently working on, many were quick to condemn the third generation's choice as vulgar, tasteless, simply a subject which deserved no further attention. Learning about the second and third generation taking over the numbers of the grandparents seemed indeed peculiar to me too, as it was in fact for the filmmaker herself, Dana Doron is a doctor in her early 30s, she got the idea to the film when she took a blood sample from a Holocaust survivor's arm.

One reason for my reservations, which at the same time prompted me to investigate this phenomenon closer, is spelled Dan Park. A few years ago I had written an article on this Swedish Street artist. He was constantly causing scandals by his provocative posters. Recently Park was even doomed to prison for incitement for racial hatred. Dealing with Park's work made me almost want to stop writing on Holocaust memory or teaching Holocaust history. Many of the posters were indeed tasteless, but some also had a point. Most importantly: they existed, in the streets, visible, ready to influence the public, asking for their reactions.

During my research I learned that Park, 3 years before Doron's documentary was made, got his own Auschwitz number in a studio in Malmö. Watching the film documenting this, seeing him getting the tattoo, hearing him say things like: "Oh, that was quick, well the Nazis had not much time neither", and "It did not hurt much", or: "Now I am famous, making a lot of money being a Holocaust survivor" --- made that my level of acceptance was reached. -- You may remember child survivor Daniel who I referred to earlier; similar words, but completely different meanings when not uttered by a survivor.

In Doron's film, one survivor says that her number is not visible anymore. Another person counters: "You should have it redone!" "But that would be fake", is the answer. But even this has already happened: in Polish artist Artur Zmijewski's work. The artist talks with 92-year-old Josef Tarnawa, a Polish prisoner of Auschwitz, about his experiences in the camp. The conversation

leads over to the artist's goal: namely to re-do the number. The artist is interested in reconstructing the very moment when Tarnawa was bereft his individuality and become a camp prisoner. I doubt that this psychoanalytical approach can be successful, given the complete different situations, and I wonder for what reason this should be done at all. The 11-minute-video makes me feel uncomfortable, as Tarnawa clearly has his reservations and the re-tattooing feels like an abuse of the old man.

But I may not have thought this through. From dealing with *enfant terrible* Dan Park I however gained a valuable insight: the number on his arm was indeed frequently used in popular culture; the number actually the one of one of Marvel comics' superheroes, published since the 1960s. Magneto's origin remains a bit unclear until his Jewish identity and his time in Auschwitz was confirmed in a comic in 1981 and then again in a book in 2009. In this book the authors refused to show his number, fearing that it might have belonged to a real person, but in the subsequent Hollywood productions of the X-MEN from 2011 the number was again visible and used effectively.

However difficult I experienced Park's work, this episode opened my eyes and showed me how alienated we academics often are from ordinary people's lives, and that we cannot allow us to ignore products of popular culture we might find odd or tasteless. It is through popular culture many young people learn about history, including the Holocaust.

And this knowledge is indeed made use of, coming also in the display of Auschwitz tattoos. When daily between 30-50 Holocaust survivors die, the need grows to create links to the past. Permanent tattoos are only one way; there are other projects as 'People. Not Numbers' (2012). High school students and students of universities in Israel, but also elsewhere as in Hongkong and New York, receive a postcard affixed with a temporary tattoo of an Auschwitz number, accompanied with a code to enable the interested to learn more about the life story of the person behind the original number on the internet, accessible via their mobile phones. This project raised a lot of debate, but it seems that it is now considered to become part of the curricula in Germany, as some newspapers stated.

This project illustrates the wish to connect the younger generation to the life stories of those who soon will no longer be with us. In the light of that the living connection soon will be missing; one may ask: are such performative approaches real possibilities to bridge the gap from the past into the future, and ensure that we keep our promise to 'Never forget'?

The few stories of the children and grandchildren taking over a family member's tattoo presented in Doron's film are by no means an isolated phenomenon but illustrate in fact a wider trend, which can be found not only in Israel, but many countries. And of course there exist many more uses of the Auschwitz numbers in art and popular culture than the three examples presented here.

If we hold on to Doron's film for a moment: What are the reasons for getting a permanent Auschwitz tattoo? Out of the film and the few articles on the subject I detect the following reasons:

- The grandparents had been objects of degradation, but over time they were regarded as living monuments and living connections to a dreadful past. By tattooing themselves the grandchildren seem to want to bridge the gap to this past. The commitment of the "never again" is obviously taken seriously. The tattooed number acts as a reminder, a promise to not forget and inform future generations; these young people imagine themselves being grandparents one day, being asked by their grandchildren about the meaning of the number.
- Bearing witness is understood as a co-ownership. The grandchildren want to confirm and deepen their relation to their family members. Their choice is a permanent one, private and intimate, but at the same time a public statement in the here and now. With their embodied act of re-creating a visible reminder they engage others, provoke questions and conversations. The reactions they get are however far from positive only: some find it pathetic, consider it wrong to take over another person's victimhood, think these young people only want to gain attention; to many these numbers were long considered sacred and the use of them a form of trivialization.
- However, these young people want to be bearers of memory – literally and in a visible sense, making their relative's experiences an integrated, un-removable part of their body. For Eli, granddaughter of Yosef Diamond, carrying around a photo was not enough, a tattoo cannot be removed. It was important for her that this memory was constantly with her. The connection to their survivor-relative had to be intimately, and eternally, or let's say: a life-long commitment.

Learning about the third generation's choice may evoke many people's resentment. Doron's film raised my awareness and sympathy. Still this practice may also be questioned critically.

The tattoos of the third generation differ much from those of their grandparents; they are not accurate copies of the original ones – or what is left of them: washed out ink figures often difficult to decipher in the wrinkled skin of the old person's arm. Indeed, the grandchildren's tattoos are hip in style; some have an added symbol – as Eli add the diamond for the family's last name. The

tattoos mirror the taste and attitude of their bearers. Here, it becomes clear that memory is performance, creative work, as Plate and Smelik expressed it.

Also the placement differs: while Holocaust survivors often had the numbers on the lower side of their arms, thereby most of the time not visible to them, the grandchildren decided to place them so that they become daily visible reminders, for themselves and others. Obviously we meet with a generation used to express their identity through their bodies, which at the same time function as agents of (political) statements.

But one may ask: can these tattoos really serve as a reference to the Holocaust? Seeing a young person with a flashy tattoo might not immediately evoke associations to the Holocaust. Rather to football star Zlatan Ibrahimovic who has the birth dates and for the Swedish context so crucial personal numbers of his children on his arms. So what exactly are these creative acts of memory mediating, what aspects of the past, and what do they say about the present memory practice, what is lost, what is added, what is transformed? What I would like to investigate at close range are the reactions these young people received after getting their tattoo, their after-life, and if reactions they evoked influenced how bearer looks back on his/her decision.

Another objection against the tattoos one may have is the focus on Auschwitz, reducing the complex and complicated history of the Holocaust to one camp only. Let me explain this shortly: among the iconic images from the Holocaust there is a photograph showing small children in Auschwitz pulling their arms up their sleeves, revealing the tattooed numbers. Auschwitz has become the ultimate symbol of the genocide on the European Jews, and the tattooed numbers are, as the murder in the gas chambers, today among the best known references to the Holocaust – despite the fact that most people were not killed by gas and only those who were regarded suitable for work, or medical experimentation as the children, received a number. So one may ask: how representative is the number of the Holocaust, also in insight that not only Jews received a number? This practice was employed in Auschwitz only, those who had received it had, if even a small so still a chance to survive. So does this practice risks to turn the Holocaust into an endurable tale, a miraculous survival story which still was the exception from the rule?

Let me conclude stating something obvious: Like all memory, also Holocaust memory is not static but object to change and needs objects to be able to be remembered. This, the tattoos illustrate in an ideal fashion: the original figures changed over time as also the meaning subscribed to them. Memory is both re-created and altered. The third generation acts as an active agent, trying to avoid closure. They want to avoid the transition from lived memory into historical memory we are

currently facing, as Michael Berenbaum phrased it, by at least making references to these memories, by incorporating them into their own bodies.