THE INSCRIPTION OF THE HOLOCAUST
ONTO THE BODY, SEVENTY YEARS LATER:
FROM DEHUMANIZATION OF THE SUBJECT
TO REVITALIZATION OF JEWISH IDENTITY

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Abstract: Antisemitism and the perception of Jewish identity as threatening Otherness lead to the Holocaust, the sum of nazi criminal executions directed towards Jews in World War II. After the Holocaust had ended, the survivor generation, and also the generations born after the war, were left to their own struggle with the trauma as the effect of everything that had happened. This paper aims at shedding a light on the relation between the Holocaust and the surviving generations, as well as on the way the Holocaust inscribed itself onto the bodies of those who survived, and those who were later in the position of defining their identity in relation to it.

Key words: Holocaust, postmemory, Jewish identity, bodily inscription, Otherness

The history of Jewish nation is largely marked by constant persecutions and the intention of other dominant cultures to conquer, assimilate, isolate or minimize/erase the traces of Jewish life and culture. Antisemitism,\(^1\) rooted in bigotry towards racial, religious, ethnic and, in total sum, cultural difference, stands for one of the examples of negative relations towards the Other. The specific way of life and isolation of the Jewish communities all over the world tend to induce the construction of the stereotypes and myths about Jews as threatening Otherness for everyone that does not belong to the Jewish community.\(^2\) Religious difference

\(^1\) The precise definition of the term anti-Semitism includes the bigotry towards all the Semitic nations, but it is actually, from the point when it was first used in 1879, established as a term that stands for a bigotry towards Jews and Jewish people. The term itself was first used by the German publicist Wilhelm Marr, to define the conflict between Jews and other nations after the secularization of Europe in the 18th century. Walter Laqueur and Judith Tdyor Baumel: The Holocaust encyclopedia. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, p. 16.

\(^2\) As illustration, there was a story about “Jewish poisoners of the well” who, allegedly, poisoned a well in South Germany. Because of this rumor that was spread, the whole Christian community helped in establishing lists of Jews and also supported torturing and killing of Jewish families. Valentin Groebner: Der Schein der Person. Steckbrief, Ausweis und Kontrolle im Europa des Mittelalters. C.H. Beck, Munich, 2004; Potvrda ličnosti: poternica, lična isprava i kontrola u srednjovekovnoj Evropi, trans. Meral Tarar-Tutuš. Loznica: Karpos, 2013. In recent history, the concept of “Jewish conspiracy” is based mostly on the stories of the economic domination of the Jews, as well as on the assumptions of the influence of Jews on the global world economy.
was for sure the main platform for this bigotry, and we are discovering it back in the times of the Roman Empire (and earlier). Later it grew even bigger and by the spreading of Christianity it evolved further and became the main argument for destroying and persecuting Jews.\(^3\) Surely, the real reasons behind this bigotry and discrimination, which was also institutionally executed, were connected to the idea that Jews should be denied their economic and social rights, especially since they were very successful in the professions they took – merchandise, craftwork, economy and the other professional fields they were allowed to engage in.\(^4\) The hatred towards Jewish people lead to persecutions and pogroms, with the Holocaust as one of the most striking examples in recent history. The Holocaust itself was presented as the idea and plan of “the final solution” to the issue of Jews within a European context. This plan was developed in Nazi Germany, and its main goal was to completely destroy Jewish people in Europe, in the first place in Germany, which would thus become “cleansed” and “liberated” from the “Jewish yoke”.\(^5\) In order for the state to progress, the main people of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party thought that it was necessary to eliminate those who resisted assimilation, and because of whom, as they concluded, the positive social, political, economical and cultural change was impossible.\(^6\)

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3 Jews were, both from Catholics and later Protestants, seen as “killers and the biggest enemies of Jesus Christ”. Semen Markovich Dubnov: *A short history of the Jewish people*. London: M. L. Cailingold, 1936, translation: *Kratka istorija jevrejskog naroda*, trans. Andrija Gams. Sremska Mitrovica: Tabernakl, 2006. These kinds of narrations point to a long-time present dynamics of tension in the way Christianity sees Judaism, which grew in importance through the fact that Christianity itself started by secession from the traditional Jewish belief. The constant need to go back to this break and the need to define Christianity as a separate entity in relation to Judaism in the fields of theology and religion often lead to further tensions, which mostly had negative effects on Jewish people.

4 “Jews use freedom to get rich, to organize big economies, to open banks, and now they even want to become clerks, doctors, advocates, engineers, writers and publishers and they want positions that Christians could attain; by their looks Jew is also a German, French, Russian, but he is nevertheless a stranger to us, not only by his belief, but also by his character, by his Asian-Semitic race, and we will never be able to live together with him” Ibid. pp. 221–222. All translations from Serbian to English are given by the author.

5 Laqueur and Baummel: *The Holocaust encyclopedia*.

6 “By the final solution (which and by no accident includes Roma people and other groups proven to be immune on the pressure of integration) Nazism tried to silently liberate the Western political scene from that unbearable shadow, so to finally create German Volk, the people that should have cured the initial biopolitical break (it is because of this that Nazi leaders kept repeating that by elimination of Jews and Roma they will be doing the favor to all the other European countries too)”. Giorgio Agamben: *Homo sacer: Suverena moć i goli život*, trans. Mario Kopic. Loznica: Karpos, 2013, p. 262. (Giorgio Agamben: *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1995).
The fear of the Other usually manifests itself through the construction of myths and through the production of representations that create the signification of the Other as a threat towards the stability of the dominant system. Antisemitic propaganda insisted on racial differences between Germans and Jews and on the construction of the model of the perfect Arian who stood in contrast with all its Others. Within that ideology, Jews were presented as everything that is not Arian and that people should not be if they wanted to retain their identity and position in the hierarchy of social power. In this way the Arian was also presented as a healthy, valid and proper subject, and Jewish identity was defined as a clear point of difference serving as a model of difference that should be tamed and controlled.7 This kind of politics lead to the perception that, as Giorgio Agamben says, “a Jew within nazism is the main negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty, and as such he stands for the school example of homo sacer”.8 The Nuremberg Laws, which put the Jews under sanctions and in the misposition of citizens of second order, were just an introduction to the process of the complete dehumanization of people of Jewish origin, which meant full denial of all aspects of identity, and stripping down the person to life itself. The denial of all human rights, and after that the deportation to the concentration camps and death camps that destroyed six million Jewish lives, was a process that was thought through in advance, that was voted for, verified and put into reality.9 Some social groups were institutionally defined and marked not only as not compatible for social life with the other, valid members of the society, but also as not worthy of life itself. Regarding this, Giorgio Agamben says that what happened in Nazi camps cannot be seen just as an irrational crime that one human being executed on another human being, but we need to think “which are the legal procedures and dispositives of power that made a human being into a being without its rights and expectations, so much that the crime on them wasn’t seen as a crime at all”.10

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10 Ibid., p. 250.
DESUBJECTIFICATION AND BODY ANNULMENT
OF THE JEWISH PRISONERS IN NAZI CAMPS

“When death is here, I am no longer here, not just because
I am nothingness, but because I am unable to grasp.”11

By closing Jews in the ghettos, Jews were prevented from mingling with other
citizens, but it was the camp deportation that can be seen as the beginning phase of
mass execution and organized control of the bodies of those who did not have any
rights and freedom anymore. Entering into the camp, these bodies were categorized as: working bodies, medically-fit-for-experiment bodies, or as waste – nonusable
bodies which were to be terminated, destroyed.12 It led to further procedures: those who were not selected for the gas chamber or other types of execution were
ordered to take their clothes off, they were sent for their head and body to be shaved, disinfected and showered. They were given the camp uniform, after which they would be registered by the system of camp identification.13 The first mark that was given to the prisoners was the serial number, while the second was the cloth type mark, most usually in the shape of a triangle of different colors, where every color represented a category into which the prisoner was put.14 The numbers the prisoners got were the only mark of individual identity – they were called up by those numbers, and they were forbidden to use their names and last names. This treatment had its goal – the dehumanization of the prisoners, their desubjetification and humiliation. The whole chain from arresting and deportation to the camps, all the way to marking the prisoners with the serial number was followed by cruel behavior towards prisoners, which left them in the state of feeling powerless, and which, consequentially, shut down each and every will for fighting back.

14 The political prisoners wore red triangles, the criminals green, the homosexuals pink. Roma people got the brown ones, while Jews wore two triangles forming the Star of David – one was yellow and the other one was in the color that defined the other category that they were put in – political prisoner, criminal, homosexual etc. Jane Caplan: “Gender and the concentration camps”, in: Concentration camps in Nazi Germany, eds. Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann. New York: Routledge, 2010, pp. 82-107.
The specific way of marking was established in the complex of concentration camp Auschwitz, where the prisoners got their serial numbers tattooed on their body.\(^\text{15}\) This camp was mainly a place for deporting Jews, and as the practice of tattooing a serial number was not done on political and other German prisoners, the number also grew to be a mark of somebody’s Jewishness. At first people were tattooed on their chest, but soon the forearm became a chosen place to tattoo the number on.\(^\text{16}\) One of the reasons for introducing the tattooing system was the greater number of deaths in the camp and the impossibility of identifying the bodies which were left laying at one place without clothes onto which was initially sewed this identification number. The system of tattooed numbers was introduced as a way to solve that problem and to make the camp administration work easier, and besides that, the whole system made it easier to terminate a person’s life for it was not a person whose life would be taken, but a number.

The tattooed number on the skin of survivors of Auschwitz, as well as other trauma marks on their bodies, are a material testimony of the trauma survived, and a reminder of all the horrors these bodies went through. However, their function was not to testify about the trauma, but to brand and mark the body as an object and a commodity of the regime that had generated it. The tattoos are the direct inscription into the body of those who were condemned to work until total exhaustion and death. Besides very bad conditions in which the prisoners lived, which also contributed to their exhaustion, spreading of diseases and death rates, the very hard work was one of the main causes for the prisoners’ bodies’ deterioration. The hardest work tasks were reserved for the lowest of humans, as the Nazi regime saw it: for Jews. The compulsory work was one of the main tools not only for terrorizing and demoralizing the prisoners, but also for their destruction. That was the reason why high functioners of the Third Reich saw determination through work as one of the better solutions for “the Jewish issue”.\(^\text{17}\)

The torture imposed on the bodies in the Nazi camps during the Holocaust was not just finished with the death of over six million Jews, but it continued to live and haunt those who somehow succeeded to survive the camps and witness the


\(^{16}\) In the beginning, instruments that looked like metal brands with thorns were used for tattooing. They were used to press holes in the skin and afterwards, ink was rubbed in. This system showed as slow and not efficient enough, so it was replaced by the tattooing process with a needle. Daniel Miller. “Revealed: The evil-looking gadgets Auschwitz guards made as instruments of genocide to stamp tattooed numbers onto doomed prisoners”, in: *Mail Online*, 11 March 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2578422/The-evil-looking-implements-used-Auschwitz-guards-tattoo-numbers-prisoners-held-Nazi-death-camp.html (06.01.2017).

\(^{17}\) Wagner: “Work and extermination in the concentration camps”, pp. 139–140.
end of the war alive. The survivors are left to testify about their experiences, but they cannot give testimony about the worst of the horrors which happened there – the death of so many people. Death is the ultimate Otherness which marked the Holocaust, “an event over which the subject is not master, an event in relation to which the subject is no longer a subject”.\(^\text{18}\) Knowing that, death remains to be the point that has no survivors to testify about it, after it there is no one who could understand it and tell other people about it. “The now is the fact that I am master, master of the possible, master of grasping the possible. Death is never now. When death is here, I am no longer here, not just because I am nothingness, but because I am unable to grasp.”\(^\text{19}\) It is precisely for that reason that we cannot experience, tell about, describe and represent death, that it is impossible to testify and talk about everything that happened in the Holocaust. The only things left of it are testimonies, stories about it, interpretations and representation that aim at remembering and saving it from forgetting. The Holocaust is, thus, the point of trauma onto which both the survivors, and the latter generations come back persistently.\(^\text{20}\)

**THE HOLOCAUST HERITAGE**

“...the identity without memory is empty, the memory without identity is pointless”\(^\text{21}\)

The generations born after the Holocaust can be connected to this dark period of human history only through the narration of the past given in textual descriptions made during the Holocaust and after it. Those texts were the media for displacing the trauma from the generation of survivors onto the generation that followed. Their heritage is not only to ask questions and inform themselves about the Holocaust, but also to fill in the blanks and (re)construct the memories attached to it, so as to try to remember things that did not directly happen to them. The trauma of the survived scenario was transmitted directly from the first to the second generation not only through verbal communication and talks about the past,

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\(^\text{18}\) Levinas: “Time and the Other”, p. 40.

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid. p. 41.

\(^\text{20}\) "The eclectic definition of the second big term – trauma – is nested into the map of memory and remembrance (internal worlds), historical happening (external world), the physical and psychological pain and facing the fact through narrative articulation [...] In the trauma of contemporaneity there is a trauma of the past; in the traumas of this moment there are traumas that are lie in the forgetting of the past generation, so the quest leads to their textual discovery and connection”. Nevena Daković: *Studije filma: ogledi o filmskim tekstovima sećanja*. Beograd: Fakultet dramskih umetnosti, 2014, pp. 153–154.

but also through the direct insight into the consequences that these happenings induced. Even in the cases where there were no conversations between the first and the second Holocaust generations, the burden of what the parents survived put a pressure onto the whole family. In these cases, it was exactly this emptiness which was a part of the family history that opened up most of the questions in children and made them research and complete the memory so they could (re)create the line that was broken.\textsuperscript{22} However, although the second generation\textsuperscript{23} can be seen as a generation that, through their parents, had a \textit{live connection} to what had happened, and that was the closest to the pain and suffering that followed the Holocaust, it does not end the process of transmitting the trauma onto the generations. Every following generation, however less direct their connection to the Holocaust would be due to time distance, will have the same need to fill in the blank space, to try to understand, to identify with the victims and to continue to talk and create their own narration that connects them to the past.

Marianne Hirsch was analyzing the problematic of the second generation’s relation to the Holocaust and the phenomena of memory and she introduced the term \textit{postmemory}, which “describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right”.\textsuperscript{24} She thinks that postmemory as a process is not necessarily connected only to the persons that have direct family relations to the trauma, in this case the Holocaust, but that it is created also by all the other persons that developed a certain attitude and standpoint towards what had happened to the victims within the historical context. In that sense, she claims \textit{postmemory} not as the identity position, although there is a certain identification/positioning process within it through which the person who forms it relates to a certain happening.

The personal stories published as diaries, memoirs, interviews, as well as the photographs and documentary material that show what happened inside of Nazi camps leave a strong mark on the reader/viewer and transform into the medium of postmemory. The photographs depicting dead, emacited, tortured human

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{23} “The guardianship of the Holocaust is being passed on to us. The second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, or into myth. It is also the generation in which we can think about certain questions arising from the Shoah with a sense of living connection.” Eva Hoffman: \textit{After such knowledge: Memory, history, and the legacy of the Holocaust}. New York: Public Affairs, 2004, see Marianne Hirsch: “The generation of postmemory” in: \textit{Poetics Today}, 29, Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 2008, pp. 103–128, here p. 103.
\bibitem{24} Hirsch, “The generation of postmemory”, p. 103.
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bodies piled up induce an *abjection* within the viewer, it unsettles him or her and becomes a part of the memory reconstructed in the construction of the narrative of understanding of what was seen and what had happened. The other types of trauma representations work in a similar way and need not be necessarily of a documentary character. They become the replacement for the real, lived experience, since it is impossible to be lived through, anyway.\(^{25}\)

The process of postmemory creation has an important role in building Jewish identity in the generations born after the Holocaust. Their attitude towards what happened to their parents, other members of the family and in general, to Jewish people, contributes to the feeling of a presence of strong collective\(^{26}\) belonging to the Jewish community. The sole fact that, during the Second World War, there was six millions of Jewish victims, points to the significance that the Holocaust has to every single Jewish family. It is the key historical point in the recent Jewish history, so it logically becomes the common denominator for all the Jews who survived. It becomes the point of connection in every talk about past and it is reactivated as a trauma in every family photograph. The hugeness of the happening which destroyed over sixty percent of the whole Jewish population in Europe speaks of its significance within Jewish memory for itself, and it also influenced the individual and collective attitude of Jews towards their religious, ethnical, cultural and familial identity.

The perception of Jewish identity and the relation towards it as the threatening Otherness by the dominant population that came in contact with the Jews culminated during the Second World War. However, as it was seen, even such a huge crime as the Holocaust did not really influence the existence of antisemitism in Europe and the world. This development had an influence on strengthening ethnical identity within the individual, so a big number of those who turned away from Jewish roots, tradition and culture started to turn back to it.\(^{27}\) After the war, as a result of a long work of zionist organizations, the state of Israel was established with its politics of gathering all Jews into the territory of one state and creating a secular national concept of Jewishness into which the religious and traditional heritage should be incorporated. One of the important goals was the building of a “new Jewish identity” – Hebrews / Israelis who are strongly attached to the state of Israel and to a / its specific Jewish culture.\(^{28}\) This new

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\(^{27}\) Etinger, Istoriija jevrejskog naroda.

The inscription of the Holocaust

identity also meant a different attitude towards Jewish heritage – in contrast to Jews from diaspora who mostly assimilated during the nineteenth and twentieth century, Jews from Israel built a strong ethnical, national identity. The feeling of unity with the young Israelis from diaspora / with Israelis who had come to Israel from diaspora only a short time ago developed a lot later, after Adolf Eichmann’s trial (1961, Jerusalem). The trial was public, it was broadcasted through media and it created another, maybe the most real and direct confrontation of the second generation with the horrors of the Holocaust.29 Besides, the Arab-Israeli War from 1967 connected Israel more deeply to the diaspora which responded with massive support.30

Since the 1960s the interest in topics related to the Holocaust grew stronger, and in the 1970s and 1980s there was an explosion of texts dealing with these problematics. This was the period when the second generations started to create their own narration about the Holocaust, and to thematize the way the Holocaust is imprinted in their subjectivity and their own body through memoirs, novels, movies, comics and other art and representational forms. A third generation member, the photographer Marina Vainshtein, portraited her own attitude towards the Holocaust and Jewish identity through numerous tattoos on her body. She is the child of Jewish emigrants who moved from Ukraine to California in 1977 after the antisemitic pressures that continued in the USSR even after the Second World War. After coming to the USA, she first went to Jewish primary school, and then to a regular state school, where she first met the social diversity and the numerous possibilities of identities that people can internalize and represent.31 In that period she became aware of the fact that she was no different than all the other people, and that her Jewish identity could not be observed just by looking at her body. That “invisibility” that the generation of the Holocaust survivors craved for, traumatized by all the happenings during the war and the time before, was just another failure and another haunting point for the second and the third generation. Besides that, those who survived the Holocaust and decided to live outside Israel were in such fear that all the things that had happened could happen again, that they chose to assimilate in the dominant culture not mentioning their

29 A lot of people tried to protect their children by silence. After World War II, by moving to Israel, they wanted to begin anew and to forget the fears that they went through during the war.
30 “Demonstrations of the Jews in diaspora, voluntary mobilization of the strengths and supplies for Israel, which overwhelmed the whole Jewry from all over the world in that moment, deepened the feelings of unity of the whole Jewish nation and strengthened the interest in Jewish fate, history and culture.” Etinger: Istorija jevrejskog naroda, p. 537.
Jewish roots. However, the generations born after the war, and especially the third generation, want something completely different – they want their Jewish identity to be visible, they want to show themselves as the survivors born by the Holocaust survivors, they want to share the message that there is no place for fear and discrimination. Antisemitism in both cases functions as a very important factor in identity building; it leads to an action – that of concealing Jewish identity or that of emphasizing it, and in both cases it is inscribed onto the body. In contrast to numerous young Jews who choose to tattoo familiar Jewish symbols such as the Star of David or a text in Hebrew aleph-bet, Marina Vainshtein decided to go for tattoos that revoke the symbolics of the Holocaust. Her body is covered in familiar images of Nazi camps – a barbed wire, a crematorium, the words Arbeit Macht Frei (work liberates), the same as the ones that were placed on the gates of Auschwitz, there is the train that drives the prisoners into the camp, the camp watchtower, a can with the label Zyklon B on it (the pesticide, a sort of cyanide, used for killing people in gas chambers), and more of the other violent scenes characteristic for the Nazi camps. Besides the images of the Holocaust, she tattooed the English phrase Never Again, which is a motto of the Jewish Defense League, and Never Forget in Hebrew, as well as the verses from The Book of Job (“Earth hide not my blood”) on her body. These texts show her attitude towards what Jews went through during the Second World War, and also her wish and will to show the importance of not forgetting a crime like that. As she herself says: “To have these tattoos is equal to a performance of a political act and clear standpoint. I want people to remember what happened there. It is so important to me that I turned my own skin into a canvas dedicated to the remembrance of the Holocaust.”

One of the tattoos of Marina Vainshtein is also a number on the forearm, on the same place where Jewish prisoners were tattooed for the purpose of an identification by number. During the Holocaust, the practice of tattooing the number was another way of humiliating the person, as Primo Levi says, “its symbolic meaning was clear to everyone: this is an indelible mark, you will never leave here; this is the mark with which slaves are branded and cattle sent to the slaughter, and that is what you have become. You no longer have a name; this is your new name. The violence of the tattoo was gratuitous, an end in itself, pure

32 In the USA, after the Holocaust, it was a customary among Jews to to have a rhinoplasty operation so as to remove the stereotypical sign of Jewish identity – the “Jewish nose”. Sander Gilman: Jewish frontiers: Essays on bodies, histories, and identities. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
34 Idem.
offense”. More than half a century later, young Jews take on them the practice of tattooing the numbers the members of their families had or still have. They see it as a way to save the memory of what happened to their ancestors and generally, to Jewish nation, and one of the ways to stay connected to those who got this number in the Nazi camp. This number is a material proof of everything that a person who got it went through.

The phenomenon of the tattooed number on the forearm is a symbol that is present a lot in all the talks and representations of the Holocaust. Canadian artist John Scott created a mixed-media artwork called Selbst, which contains pieces of his own skin onto which, before it was surgically cut out and removed, he tattooed the seven digits number. This artist considers his work the act of “the inscription of the memory into the body” and by that he refers to the memory of the crimes that took place during the Holocaust. Although he does not share Jewish roots with the victims, he was so much under the impression that his work, as he says, stands for a reaction to the passivity and indifference of most of the people to everything that happened in the camps.

The inscriptions of the number – tattooing it on the skin of homo sacer of the Holocaust, the numeration in order to dehumanization and desubjectification of the Jews today, seventy years after the Holocaust – have become an act of redefinition and strengthening of Jewish identity in the second and the third post-holocaust generation. The tattoo of the number today symbolizes the difference through two platforms: the platform of the conscious no to assimilation (which is the conscious intention not to accept the minority identity as a negativity), and through the platform of the standpoint that history has a major role in building and strengthening the Jewish identity. Never again is thus not only something that points to the general collective historical memory, but also a specific, individual motto, which connects the second and the third post-holocaust generation to Jewish identity, culture and life.

35 Apel: “The tattooed Jew”, p. 302
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