



# How Memory Survives: Descendants of Holocaust Survivors and the Progenic Tattoo

DOI:  
[10.1177/07255136211042453](https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136211042453)

**Document Version**  
Final published version

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**  
Bloch, A. (2021). How Memory Survives: Descendants of Holocaust Survivors and the Progenic Tattoo. *Thesis Eleven*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136211042453>

**Published in:**  
Thesis Eleven

**Citing this paper**  
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

**General rights**  
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Takedown policy**  
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact [uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk) providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.





---

# How memory survives: Descendants of Auschwitz survivors and the progenic tattoo

Thesis Eleven

1–16

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/07255136211042453

[journals.sagepub.com/home/the](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/the)



**Alice Bloch**

University of Manchester, UK

## Abstract

The impact of the Holocaust on the descendants of survivors and the ways in which they embrace, embody and memorialise their family histories is the subject of this paper. The paper explores intergenerational storytelling and silences about the Holocaust through the lens of the number that was tattooed on the bodies of inmates in the Auschwitz complex and has been replicated on the bodies of some survivor descendants. The number has become a symbol of the crimes of the Holocaust though its meaning has changed during different periods of Holocaust remembrance. Using the genealogy of the tattoo, this paper explores its meaning in relation to private and public memorialisation for the descendants of survivors living in Israel who have replicated the number on their own body. An earlier version of this paper was presented in December 2020 at La Trobe University's Agnes Heller Annual Sociology Lecture.

## Keywords

Holocaust, intergenerational memory, memorialisation, tattoos

The Soviet Army liberated Auschwitz on 27 January 1945. After the liberation, survivors went on to form families, having children, grandchildren, and some of the last survivors have great-grandchildren. The impact on the descendants of survivors and the complex and varied ways in which they embrace, embody and memorialise their family histories both publicly and privately is the subject of this paper. Focusing on the small but growing trend among the descendants of survivors to replicate the concentration camp number on

---

## Corresponding author:

Alice Bloch, Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.

Email: [alice.bloch@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:alice.bloch@manchester.ac.uk)

their own body, this paper explores memory and family relationships within the context of public memory and memorial practices.

The practice of tattooing numbers on the arms of prisoners in the Auschwitz concentration camp complex began in 1942 when it became impossible to keep records. Prior to tattooing numbers on people, they had been sewn on clothes. As more people were killed and clothes were removed from corpses it became increasingly difficult to keep accurate records. Everyone had a number tattooed on their arm and a matching number and code on their jacket. For example, Jews had a triangle and a number and Romani had the letter Z from the German word for a person of Roma heritage. The number represents the depersonalisation of the individual in the concentration camp. According to Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*:

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 slaughter, and that is what you have become. You no longer have a name; this is your new name. (2017 [1986]: 104)

The tattoo, which was only used in the Auschwitz concentration camp complex, has become a symbol of the crimes of the Holocaust, although its meaning has changed during the different epochs of Holocaust remembrance. There are broadly three phases of Holocaust remembering: 1945–61, 1961–80, and 1980 onwards (Wieviorka, 1999; Wolf, 2017). The different epochs are important not just in terms of collective and public memory around the Holocaust but also in relation to how these connect with and affect the personal lives of survivors and their families. In the context of the Holocaust, the tattoo is the physical embodiment of suffering which was once a stigma, then a medal of honour, and now an agent of remembrance (Schult, 2017). In contemporary society, the body has become a site for resignification, a living proof of the failure of the genocide (Brouwer and Horwitz, 2015).

This paper draws on ongoing research with the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors to explore the decision of some of the descendants of survivors to replicate the concentration camp number by having it tattooed on their own body. Using the genealogy of the tattoo, the research explores both inter- and cross-generational memory and private and public memorialisation through the lens of Israel's historical, national, political, social and cultural context. Weaving in data from two in-depth interviews with the children of survivors – Sara and Adam – carried out in November 2018, this paper considers the different phases of Holocaust memory and memorialisation and how they map onto private and public memorial practices between generations.

Much of the post-Holocaust literature focuses on the survivor generation and their children – often described as the second generation – but there is a more recent and growing literature addressing the longer-term impacts of the Holocaust on the grandchildren of survivors and on the different generational and intergenerational experiences (Lev-Wiesel, 2007; Jacobs, 2016; Kidron, 2020). Some of this literature focuses on the psycho-social aspects of traumatic pasts, but there is also a more interdisciplinary or what Hirsch (2008) calls a post-disciplinary scholarship on memory and post-memory.

Post-memory is particularly useful as a concept because it refers to inherited memories, not those that were actually experienced but which are nevertheless so powerful that it is almost as though the person has lived the experience themselves.

Gerson and Wolf (2007) note the absence of research about the Holocaust in contemporary sociological research. They approach questions of intergenerational trauma through the lens of memory, and particularly the aspects of memory variously labelled public, collective, social, or cultural, in what they describe as a 'quintessentially sociological project' (2007: 5). Using memory as the framework enables an understanding of the complex ways in which memory is political and how it works in both the public domain and in the everyday (Radstone and Schwartz, 2010).

Wolf (2017) developed a genealogy of Holocaust survivor identity in the United States, which alongside Palestine (and from 1948 Israel) was the largest post-war place of resettlement for what was left of European Jewry. Wolf (2017) makes comparisons with the Israeli context and, like Wieviorka (1999), explores the distinct periods of Holocaust memorialisation and the changes to the perceptions of survivors within the context of memorial practices and collective and national identities.

The first period of memorialisation was the postwar period from 1945 to 1961, when artefacts, data and archival materials such as diaries, art and records were collected from camps and ghettos and places of occupation. In Israel, memorialisation was dominated by public memory, principally through the Yad Vashem Law of 1953 which created the annual Holocaust Remembrance Day known as Yom HaShoah. Public commemorations such as Yom HaShoah selectively remembered uprisings and resistance rather than the victims of the Holocaust (Navon, 2015). War heroes such as the partisans who resisted the Nazis were respected, memorialised and mourned in contrast to the Nazi collaborators – the Kapos – who survived as well as the other survivors and victims who were thought of as weak – part of European Jewry that were lambs to the slaughter. In the context of Palestine and then Israel, Holocaust survivors were framed as either feminised and passive victims or Nazi collaborators (Lentin, 2001; Yablonka, 2003). This was in contrast to Sabras – who were born in Palestine and defined as masculine and therefore strong and the opposite of Holocaust victims described by Lentin as 'stigmatised archetypal Others' (2001: 6), whose testimonies were a constant reminder of a diaspora that Israelis wanted to forget. During this period in Israel, notes Kidron (2020: 5), 'this hegemonic narrative and the embedded critique of survivors' formed public Holocaust commemoration.

Gil (2013) analysed 90 survivor testimonies relating to their experiences and encounters in Palestine/Israel between 1945 and 1955, detailing discrimination including in the labour market – especially for women, who were expected to remain in the private sphere, so the jobs available were cleaning, cooking and care work. There was also a lack of sensitivity to their experiences of the Holocaust. For example, one survivor describes being sent to a kibbutz and having to take a shower in communal barracks where the shower heads were on the ceiling exactly as they were in Auschwitz. In fact Gil notes that 'Israel's derision of Holocaust survivors constantly made newcomers feel inferior, shunned or ashamed' (2013: 504).

Goffman (1963) argues that stigma is a social relation acquired through interactions, but people also apply stigma to themselves by judging themselves against social norms.

Tyler (2020) offers a critique of Goffman because his analysis, she argues, ‘excludes the fact that social relations are always already structured through histories of power (and resistance)’ (2020: 99). The stigma of survivors was evident in the language used to describe them. They were referred to as ‘human dust’ (*avak adam*) and ‘soap’ (*sabon*) and therefore ‘unfit for society, both physically and morally’ (Gil, 2013: 503), and this was part of the ‘negation of the diaspora’ (Gil, 2013: 503) as weak and passive. The visible marking of the number – that contributed towards stigma and pity – led to some having the number surgically removed, while others wore long sleeves to cover it up. One testimony analysed by Gil describes how Haim went to the beach sometime after arriving in Israel. A surfer invited Haim to join him and Haim agreed. However, when the surfer – a man in his 20s – saw the number on Haim’s arm, according to Haim, ‘he stared and said, well, perhaps this isn’t such a good idea’ (2013: 504).

The word stigma itself derives from Greek where ‘*stig*’ means to ‘prick’ (Jones, 2000). Tattoos associated with stigma are a mark that is cut or burned onto the skin of criminals, slaves or traitors (Tyler, 2020). The stigma of the concentration camp was not only experienced in Israel – in the US, survivors also experienced stigma. Stein (2016) analysed archived interviews of survivors and their children from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC and, like Gil (2013), who was writing in the Israeli context, also demonstrates how survivor identities were stigmatised identities in this period, through the same narratives of survivors as ‘sheep to the slaughter’ or Nazi collaborators (2016: 32). Survivors tried to manage their ‘spoiled’ identities through the management of their ‘public’ identities, which could be complicated by visible signs of stigma, including the concentration camp number tattooed on their arm. Many survivors preferred to call themselves ‘immigrants’ or by their identities of origin, such as German Jew (Stein, 2016: 42).

Ruth Kluger, an Auschwitz survivor, in her autobiographical book *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* describes her alienation on arrival in the US when even relatives, who had been in the US before the start of the war, said she should wipe her memories as if wiping a chalk board, so in effect deleting her childhood. Others also noted how Jewish relatives in the US did not want to hear about the experiences of Holocaust survivors and how they were told to put the past behind them – ‘to Americanise’ (Wolf, 2017: 2). During Ruth Kluger’s decades in the US she was given numerous suggestions about how she should hide her concentration camp number, such as wearing long sleeves in hot weather, using cosmetics or wearing bracelets. Kluger bore the number A-3537, with the A an abbreviation for a higher number or, as she writes, ‘a stenographic sign for many previous killings’ (2001: 98). Throughout the memoir the reader feels the way in which survivors are silenced and stigmatised. According to Kluger, ‘we were like cancer patients who remind the unafflicted that they, too, are mortal (2001: 183).

Sara, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, who I interviewed at her home in Israel, described her father’s shame at his number. Sara was born in France in the post-war period, and her father and uncle had both survived Auschwitz. While in Auschwitz her father had worked in what was called ‘the Kanada warehouse’, as Canada was seen as the land of plenty and had become camp slang. It was where the stolen belongings of prisoners sent to the gas chambers were sorted and stored before they were killed, and

those who were slave labourers left them there on deposit. It was one of the best places to work because prisoners could procure items, including food for themselves and for other prisoners. Sara's family moved to Israel and settled there in the early 1950s when Sara was a young child. She described how she never felt like the other children, saying that 'we were always strangers'. Recounting when she first became aware of her father's number she describes the stigma and her father's shame as follows:

My father had a very big large [number] on his arm. I noticed the first time when we came to Israel, I was 6 years old, he was ashamed of the number. It was always really hot for us, we came from France . . . he has always a sleeve, but when we came to Israel suddenly everyone was laughing at him because he was not brave enough. The Sabras said we would fight Hitler, Germany he was so ashamed of it . . . it took him lots of years to put the sleeve up to show the number . . . he was not proud of the number. This was the first time, when everyone was laughing that I noticed he had the number.

Sara specifically mentions the Sabras and how they were brave and would fight, unlike the European Jewry that were portrayed at that time as being like lambs to the slaughter, and so this must have felt like a powerful 'us and them' dichotomy to her as a child arriving from post-war Europe.

Moving now to the second phase of Holocaust memorialisation – which was from the early 1960s to around 1980 – there was a shift in responses and attitudes towards survivors, from stigmatised to valorised. Central to this shift were the testimonies collected during the Eichmann trial in 1961 where survivor evidence was heard. The trial was widely reported on, including a series of articles by Hannah Arendt in *The New Yorker* magazine, that received global coverage, and were then expanded into the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt argued that the motivation behind the trial, by the then Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, was as 'a means of creating national unity among a mass of demoralised new immigrants' (Elon, 2006: xvii). The emerging concept of trauma that came out of the trial (Stern, 2000) began to transform survivor identity into a more collective identity that was also part of the Israeli national identity. The dichotomies of either hero or victim or a hero or collaborator shifted and survival itself became reframed as something heroic (Klar et al., 2013; Navon, 2015).

This period also saw the Six-Day War in 1967, in which Israel captured territories outside of the designated boundaries of the state of Israel, occupying East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. According to Navon (2015), the Six-Day War led to an embracing of 'a Holocaust-laden narrative of axiomatic victimhood centred on the Holocaust and the State of Israel' (Navon, 2015: 243), and with that a new imagined diasporic community emerged as Jews in the US embraced their association with their European pasts and supported Zionism. The new narrative placed the Holocaust and Jewish persecution at the centre and in so doing triggered a rapid re-storying of collective memory where persecution occupied 'a position of unrivalled centrality' (Navon, 2015: 364). This new narrative, in which Israel and Israeli military actions could only be viewed through the lens of the Holocaust, made it impossible to imagine the idea of Israel as a state that victimised and oppressed others (Navon, 2015).

The third phase in Holocaust memorialisation developed in conjunction with the proliferation of survivor testimony from the late 1970s onwards. Klik (2017) argues that it was not until the mid-1980s that commemoration devoted to survivors and victims really shifted. Yad Vashem – the museum in Jerusalem – houses over 131,000 survivor testimonies, over half a million photographs, and more than 200 million pages of documentation relating to the Holocaust. Though the testimonies were first collected in the late 1940s they were written, and these were followed by audio and then, in the late 1980s, video.

Both Sara and Adam had had direct contact with Yad Vashem and for both of them the experience was powerful. Sara's father had been asked to light a candle on Holocaust Memorial Day in the 1990s for the French citizens who survived the Holocaust. When they arrived at Yad Vashem he stayed outside with Sara's husband, her mother and her children while Sara went in to light the memorial candle. Sara said that, for her father, 'it was a closed story', not something he wanted to speak about generally, but on the trip to Yad Vashem he told her something of his actual experiences, for the first time. He focused on working in the Kanada and describing how Jewish people brought bread and bits of food with them that those who worked there could take and hide as they were sorting through the belongings, and that is what kept them alive.

For Adam, the experience related not to collective memorial but to the collection of testimony. Like Sara, his father did not talk about his wartime experiences when he was growing up. One day a young woman arrived at their house asking to speak to his father and to record, on video, his personal recollections of the Holocaust. Adam described how he and his mother looked at each other, both thinking there was no way he would talk to her. They were shocked when he completely opened up to her – the first person he spoke to in 40 years about his experiences – as part of a video recording – and how his father cried and cried, which was not something Adam had ever seen.

There are very few survivors left but their descendants, which include children, grandchildren and now great grandchildren, will have had and continue to have markedly different experiences of the survivor generation and of each other. Chaitin (2002) argues that a generational analysis is needed to understand the effects not only of family socialisation processes but shifting societal lessons and values surrounding the Holocaust. Specific social contexts bring particular cultural meanings to Holocaust narratives and these, in turn, impact on the identity of descendants (Jacobs, 2016).

Thinking about the impact of the Holocaust on generations requires an understanding of the different forms of transmission. Trauma can be transmitted through storytelling and silence, but also through rituals and traditions that create the opportunity and context through which to connect the descendent to the survivors' past trauma (Jacobs, 2016). For those from the second generation the telling of stories and their family histories can be powerful and can play a role in shaping identities, but the narrative gaps and the silences can be equally important (Bloch, 2018). Family memories are inherited memories. Storytelling can exclude and it can bind; it is also associated with power, the power to choose what is related and the power dynamic between the storyteller and the recipient (Eastmond, 2007; Smart, 2011).

Once a story has been told and memories are shared, the recipient reframes it through the lens of their life course and other experiences, such as national identity and collective

memory and memorialisation, which shape the social and historical aspects of the nation (Sharma, 2009; Welzer, 2010; Granata and Sarcinelli, 2012). In the case of Israel, the public and the private began to collide as the Holocaust started to define identity, began to become a marketable industry and a sharp instrument for Zionism. Where previously the horrors of the Holocaust were shrouded in silence, the move to testimony and public events created what Kidron (2003) describes as a public coming out among the second generation who began to view and make sense of their life stories and experiences through the Holocaust. During this period a Holocaust industry gathered pace. Through the cultural production of books, memoir, films and art, the second generation became influential in relating and shaping Holocaust memory (Lentin, 2001; Jacobs, 2016). Hirsch writes how this cultural production has been shaped by:

... the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma ... and by the consciousness that the child's own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss. Loss of family, of home, of a feeling of belonging and safety in the world 'bleed' from one generation to the next. (Hirsch, 2008: 112)

While the context in North America was markedly different from that of Israel, one of the consequences of the new Holocaust-centred narrative developed after the Six-Day War in 1967 was the embracing, by the Jewish diaspora, of an imagined Zionist national community (Navon, 2015). Just as in Israel, therapeutic support emerged in North America for the second generation (Stein, 2016); the children of survivors were unique in the political activism of the time in adopting a generational identity (Wolf, 2017: 6). It was the second generation, rather than survivors themselves, that were instrumental in transforming the identity of 'survivor' into a term that resonated with American values of individualism, agency and even heroism (Stein, 2016: 84; Jacobs, 2016). Wolf (2017) interprets this focus on the past (rather than on contemporary anti-Semitism) as a way for relatively privileged, racially white Jews to claim victimhood through appropriating their parents' experiences and even trauma. Stein, in contrast, interprets the adoption of a generational survivor identity as being *reflective* of the broader identity politics of the time and the identity that was adopted by the more activist-minded members of the second generation (2016: 97). The second generation, by acknowledging the impact of their own experiences, also became an important 'carrier group' in bringing the Holocaust to public consciousness by encouraging their parents to speak publicly about their experiences (Stein, 2016: 16; Jacobs, 2016).

The experiences of being from the second generation can be very impactful. While the second generation do not have firsthand experience of the trauma, they do have what Hirsch terms 'postmemory', where the effect of the transmission is so powerful for the recipient that they 'seem to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch, 2008: 107). This means that the impact of the events that happened in the past continues into the present and is transmitted intergenerationally. Trauma, in the form of postmemory, is passed on not only through narratives but also through behaviour (Lev-Wiesel, 2007). As Eva Hoffman (2005) observes, in her own biography and as the child of Holocaust survivors, even where there was silence the past was never erased – it emerged in the



‘language of the body’ (2005: 9) and ‘the past broke through in the sounds of nightmares, the idioms of sighs and illness, or tears and the acute aches that were the legacy of . . . the conditions my parents endured’ (2005: 10).

Though often thought of as being silent, not talking about their experiences, survivor parents showed significant agency in sharing stories with their children by deciding what to share and how to share it. Wolf (2019), in her analysis of interviews with the children of survivors in the US, finds that some chose not to speak while others tried to narrate their stories in ways that were age appropriate by using comedy, adventure or even fairytales. Similarly, Stein (2016) refers to the stories of a better life before the war as well as stories of heroism – both of which keep the horrors and tragedies away from the intergenerational narratives. However, these more gentle or heroic stories can be juxtaposed with terror where they move from one to the other almost seamlessly, especially where triggers and rituals prompt recollection (Jacobs, 2016; Bloch, 2018).

When I spoke with Sara, she said her father tended to only talk about liberation, but she related a story about her father, who had a scar on his chest and was missing part of his nipple. He told his children that he had been shot by the Nazis and he had survived because the bullet had been removed in the camp kitchen. He stuck with this story of heroism and survival all their lives and, according to Sara, it was:

. . . only before he died he told me that it was a lie. It was not the real story. The real story is that he has an abscess but he wanted us to see him like a hero. I mean it was important for him.

Of course there are also secrets and silences, and these can be as powerful as the stories that are shared (Smart, 2011; Ali, 2012). Hirsch and Spitzer (2009) note how silences, in the testimonies of Holocaust survivors during the Eichmann trial and the filming of Lanzmann’s *Shoah* could be more powerful than spoken words. Silence, argues Kidron, is ‘a medium of expression, communication and transmission of knowledge’ (2020: 2), though it does of course have different functions that can include a response to something that is unspeakable and a strategy to protect others (Dalgaard and Montgomery, 2015). The second generation, who grow up in close and intimate proximity to survivors, do not inherit the experience but, argues Hoffman (2010), its shadows. For some, growing up with silence made them acutely aware of being different. They knew that they lacked the extended families that their peers enjoyed, and many felt that they needed to protect their parents (Wolf, 2017). This might be a non-verbal agreement not to speak of traumatic experiences, keeping them separate from the everyday and adhering to a set of rules about what can and cannot be talked about (Wiseman et al., 2006; Frankish and Bradbury, 2012).

The idea of shadows and silences was evident in Sara’s description of her father and her uncle, neither of whom spoke about the Holocaust. As a child Sara tried to ask questions but explained how ‘it was always very secret’. Sara and her brother quickly learned not to ask because he had migraines and if something reminded him of Auschwitz, according to Sara, ‘he was lying in the bed for days’. Sara described her experiences by saying, ‘we had a secret . . . it was not a normal house . . . it was very dark, we didn’t speak about it’. Sara was very aware of how her experiences might have an

intergenerational impact on her children and she wanted things to be different for them. Reflecting on bringing up her own family she said, 'I wanted to be very different from my parents Very open heart and house. Telling everything, no secret.'

These non-verbal expressions of traumatic pasts – screaming in the night, as Hoffman (2005) described, or migraines, as Sara referred to, or using what Kidron (2009) calls 'souvenirs of death-worlds', such as objects from Nazi extermination camps – become a normalised part of family life. Kidron describes an interview where she spoke to a child of survivors who showed her a tablespoon. Asking about the significance of the spoon the interviewee explained how it was the spoon her mother used for her soup in the concentration camp and that it was housed in a drawer in the kitchen with all the other spoons. Her mother fed her children with this spoon and her explanation was simple:

Look, she won, she survived with that spoon. Every time she fed me or my sister she probably said to herself, 'Hah, I won – not only didn't I die, but this spoon that kept me alive is now feeding my children.' (2009: 11)

In this way Kidron observes that the Holocaust death-world coexists with the present and so becomes intertwined with the everyday world of the children of survivors (Kidron, 2009, 2012). The Holocaust memory was present even when not explicitly talked about and Holocaust symbols were part of early memories, part of everyday practices of lived memory. Sometimes they were mundane objects like the spoon or, among some, noticing the number tattooed on the body and wanting one too to be the same as a parent (Kidron, 2013).

The number tattooed on the body of those imprisoned in the Auschwitz complex is very much the symbol of the horrors of the Holocaust. Kidron et al. (2019) note that most descendants of survivors did not identify themselves as traumatised but instead described themselves as scratched. This scratch serves a 'permanent commemorative function' as the 'culturally esteemed carrier of collective memory' that must be carried as a burden for everyone 'so that they don't forget' (Kidron et al., 2019: 4). The goal of the scratch is to *reproduce the scar* in the next generation as a 'socially valorized marker of collective trauma' (Kidron et al., 2019: 5). The use of the word scratch is interesting especially in relation to the physical act of getting a tattoo, which is painful and involves piercing the skin – scratching – and the centrality of the number in Holocaust symbolism.

The Nazi practice of tattooing numbers on prisoners in the Auschwitz death camp, like tattoos dating back to classical civilisations, was an institutional practice, and most early tattoos were involuntary. DeMello observes that they were 'a dehumanizing way to mark slaves, prisoners, captives . . . as property (2016: 23–4). Historically the tattoo has been associated with marginalised groups and therefore seen as a stigma, but there has been a reclaiming of the practice in what Rubin (1988) terms a 'tattoo renaissance'. Certainly now tattoos are less class-based than they once were in Europe and North America and the meanings ascribed to tattoos and the practice of tattooing have radically changed as well. Tattooing has increasingly become an artistic and cultural practice (De Mello, 2016) and the act of tattooing has become an art form. Tattoos have a long history of memorial practice and take different forms. Not only do they help to remember but

they can also make other people notice and can have both a public and a private role, depending on where they are etched onto the body (Martel, 2016).

Les Back notes in *The Art of Listening* that getting a tattoo, or being pierced, 'is a moment when boundaries are breached, involving hurt and healing... it involves perforating the boundary between the internal and the external... the tattoo can be read through a range of metaphors, for example, the relationships between agency and control... trauma and healing' (Back, 2007: 73). The perforating of the boundary between the internal and the external is especially salient as the progenic tattoos perform a sometimes public and political role but they are not always about collective memory and not always political. Placing the number where others don't see it can make it completely personal, so it becomes something internal not external for the bearer.

Sara and Adam offer good examples of contrasting positioning of the tattoo on their bodies. Sara had her father's number tattooed in a place that was almost always covered while Adam's was very visible. Sara got the number tattooed on the day her father died. She rushed straight from the hospital, and even though when she told him her plans to get the tattoo he was furious and told her not to do it, she felt compelled to do it as the number was so much part of their lives. She had the number etched onto her body in a place that was rarely visible and described her thinking as follows:

I mean it was a secret like my life... No one will see it... It's very small... On the leg... Most of the time I would wear long pants... it's between me and me... I thought where to do it... And I did it the same hand of my father, that it was left... So I did it on the left leg... I didn't know where to put it... And I said this is a good place.

Adam had a number tattooed on his forearm and it was one of many tattoos that he bore on his body, each one telling a story from his life, with the first one acquired at the age of 16. Adam's tattoo was quite large – about 9 or 10 centimetres in length – and was very prominent. The tattoo included the image of the perimeter fence and then underneath it was his father's number. Adam got the tattoo while his father was still alive and described it as:

The Holocaust fence, also, with the, the needles all the [spikes]... And the number of my father... To remember him, to be at peace with him and I will not forget it... Until I die, until I die... I want to see sometimes you know when I walk you know sometimes... You meet him again...

I asked Adam what his father thought of the tattoo and he said: 'My father when I show it, he cry and he speak nothing. He say why? That's finished. Why? And then he cry.'

Both Sara and Adam received a very strong emotional response from their parent and although they positioned the number on their own bodies in very different places with very different potential for public gaze, Adam was clear that it was for him to remember, to see in the everyday when walking around. When I interviewed Adam, in a café, his partner was also there. Adam described every tattoo on his body to me carefully, explaining the significance of each one to his life, but initially skipped over the Holocaust tattoo, which was clearly visible on his forearm as he wore a T-shirt. When I asked

him specifically about that one, his partner came into the conversation and said, 'he never talks about that one, even when I ask him, he just doesn't want to'. When his partner said how he evaded questions about the tattoo he then described it to me and explained the private function in his life but the need for it to be visible to him (though that meant it was visible to others too) as a reminder in the everyday. There is an interesting reflection to be made here on the power of what is not spoken, as Back points out when he stresses the need to be attentive to 'the realm of embodied social life that operates outside of talk' (2007: 95). What is written on the body is part of that and, in this case, the silence surrounding something so visible and so evocative but also painful for Adam is particularly poignant.

While Sara and Adam are both children of people who lived through the Holocaust, they were very aware of the intergenerational aspects of their family biographies and of their tattoo as a physical embodiment of memory. A tattoo in its particular form which is etched on someone's skin only lasts as long as the person who bears it, although of course it lives on in other forms both physical and digital like photos and through memory as it is recalled by those who saw it (Martel, 2016). Both Adam and Sara specially mentioned the intergenerational aspects of the tattoo, both alluding to the fact that their children would replicate it. Sara said:

I was very proud when my daughters and my son they say that they are going to do it one day. I think it's . . . good . . . it's a memory. I mean it's something because they are not with us anymore the people who have died in Auschwitz and who have been. My daughter will do it, I will be very happy because it's memory for my father and everything.

It seems that the trend of the progenic tattoo is much more evident among the grandchildren of survivors rather than their children. The experiences of the grandchildren of survivors differs markedly from that of their parents. While the issues for the so-called second generation are often framed as piecing together a story to go alongside the deep *affect* transferred by their parents (Hoffman, 2010; Stein, 2016), for the third generation, Weissman argues, the opposite is the case, that they 'are haunted not by the traumatic impact of the Holocaust, but by its absence' (2004: 22). This means that the third generation search for the impact that goes with their family histories, and this is where the public memorial takes on a particular function of claiming and re-claiming. Public memory such as Holocaust education, diaspora tourism, and visiting Holocaust museums is often cited as a trigger for grandchildren to engage with 'private' family memory, and these activities bring the public into the private and the private into the public (Sagi-Schwartz et al., 2008; Kidron, 2020).

The progenic tattoo is significant because it forms part of the preparation for the fourth phase of Holocaust remembrance, where the survivors are for the most part dead and so eyewitness testimony can no longer be collected – in effect the post-witness era. Brouwer and Horwitz call the progenic tattoo a form of trauma tattoo which they describe as an 'inscription upon the body that signifies a wound' (2015: 538). The wound can be individually experienced or collectively experienced and it can be imposed (as in the case of those tattooed in Auschwitz) or chosen (the progenic tattoo), making it a form of cultural resignification that can have different meanings. It can be an act of personal

and private remembrance, an identity affirming act, a political act or a more out-facing public act that contributes to collective engagement with the past as well as inter-generational memorialisation.

Sara talked a lot about the intergenerational aspects of private and public memory. She always accompanied her grandchildren to school on Holocaust Memorial Day, which she felt touched them more than some others because of their family history. Her children had all been on the school trip to Poland, sponsored by the government, which included a visit to Auschwitz and to the ghettos in Poland. Feldman (2002) argues that these trips have a wider political function that reinforces the Israeli nation and nationalist values as a reminder, before these young people enter compulsory military service, that Israel is the only country where Jews are safe. For some of those from the third generation – that is the grandchildren of survivors – these activities are seen as a trigger for engagement in ‘private’ family memory (Sagi-Schwartz et al., 2008), and this was certainly the case for Sara and her children. Before going on the school trip, Sara’s oldest daughter asked her grandfather for some information about his wartime experiences and he told her where he had slept. After telling her teacher how important it was for her to see it, they opened the block especially for her. Her daughter found the suitcase of her grandfather, Sara’s father, in a corner with his name on it. The teacher had a phone and so she let her call her grandfather and, in Sara’s words:

She said you know I found a suitcase of yours. You want me to take it? I’ll bring it to Israel.

He say you leave it there. I left all my memories there and I will leave also my suitcase there . . . All my girls later they went to [the block] to see the suitcase.

Sara was very aware of how her experiences might impact on her children and she wanted things to be different for them, as noted earlier – a house which was open and without secrets. Despite her efforts not ‘to be a museum for the Holocaust’, the Holocaust was prominent in her home. When I interviewed Sara, we spoke sitting on bar stools at the edge of her living room area that contained a large sofa, a large fireplace, and above the fireplace a picture that her daughter had made Sara for her birthday. Sara’s daughter had involved her in the process, which had made it enjoyable for her as a mother/daughter activity. It was a screen print of the perimeter fences of Auschwitz with a man in the foreground on the right-hand side wearing the striped concentration camp uniform and the cap. Initially Sara said the picture, which was very large, was of her father and then said he looked like her father but wasn’t, but Sara had added her father’s number to the picture. Sara described it as ‘just a small memory’ and that her other photos linking to the Holocaust were ‘upstairs on the piano’. To the outsider – which was me, looking – the picture took centre stage in the room as it was placed above the fireplace with the sofas and chairs facing it. Even though Sara tried to create a home for her children that did not focus on the Holocaust she found this difficult to achieve. As in Kidron’s (2009) study, the objects from the death world and its symbols were co-existing in the present and were clearly evident but also normalised as part of everyday life. As Sara said herself, ‘it’s not easy to be in a family who was in the Holocaust’.

The Holocaust continues to have a profound impact on the political, collective, social and cultural landscape of Israel where it is embedded in the narratives of state formation,

nation, nationalism and identity and the meta-narratives through which people understand their histories and their family relations. This paper has drawn on data from an ongoing project that explores the different epochs of Holocaust memory and memorialisation and family relationships through the lens of the number tattooed on the bodies of prisoners in the Auschwitz concentration camp and then replicated on the bodies of their descendants. The intergenerational impacts of the Holocaust on the descendants of survivors in the private domain of family life and relationships are interwoven with changing attitudes towards survivors and the identity and politics of the nation. The research site of Israel offers a particular social, cultural, historical and political context where public events now value one part of the nation's history – European Jews – while excluding the diversity of histories that exist in Israel. As Kidron observes: 'Holocaust-related scars become the requisite markers of descendant authenticity, entitlement to symbolic capital and valorised social status' (2003: 537).

The concentration camp number tattooed on the body is recognised within society as an inherited form of victimhood and of trauma but also an honour for those with a very specific family history and identity. The interviews with Sara and Adam illuminate not only the public and collective aspects of memorialisation but the very private ways in which the genealogy of the concentration camp number inked onto the bodies of survivors and their descendants profoundly impacts on everyday life. As such, it offers a vehicle through which to explore the complex relationships between memory, memorialisation, intergenerational and cross-generational storytelling and personal lives. A relational approach to the tattoo itself can trace how it weaves its way into family narratives and intergenerational stories about the Holocaust and in so doing can create new family dynamics and dialogues between and within generations.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Anousheh Haghdadi for excellent research assistance. Thanks also to Kirsty Campbell, Amal Treacher Kabesh, Kinneret Lahad and Liza Schuster who read drafts and/or took time to discuss the main themes and ideas in the paper. Thanks also to those who made useful and insightful comments in the discussion that followed the Agnes Heller Annual Sociology Lecture (2020) at La Trobe University and especially Martina Boese for the invitation and the encouragement to present on this on-going research. Finally thank you to colleagues at Thesis Eleven – Timothy Andrews, Peter Beilharz and Julian Potter for their comments, engagement and encouragement – throughout the process of re-drafting the original lecture.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

This research was funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Small Research grant in partnership with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

## References

- Ali S (2012) The sense of memory. *Feminist Review* 100(1): 88–105.
- Back L (2007) *The Art of Listening*. Oxford: Berg.
- Bloch A (2018) Talking about the past, locating it in the present: The second generation from refugee backgrounds making sense of their parents' narratives, narrative gaps and silences. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31(4): 647–663.
- Brouwer D and Horwitz LD (2015) The cultural politics of progenic Auschwitz tattoos: 157622, A-15510, 4559, . . . . *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101(3): 534–558.
- Chaitin J (2002) Issues and interpersonal values among three generations in families of Holocaust survivors. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 19(3): 379–402.
- Dalgaard NT and Montgomery E (2015) Disclosure and silencing: A systematic review of the literature on patterns of trauma communication in refugee families. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52(5): 579–593.
- DeMello M (2016) Memories on the skin: A brief cultural history of tattooing. In: Davidson D (ed.) *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars, pp. 21–30.
- Eastmond M (2007) Stories as lived experience: Narratives in forced migration research. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20(2): 248–264.
- Elon A (2006) Introduction: The excommunication of Hannah Arendt. In: Arendt H, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Feldman J (2002) Marking the boundaries of the enclave: Defining the Israeli collective through the Poland 'experience'. *Israel Studies* 7(2): 84–114.
- Frankish T and Bradbury J (2012) Telling stories for the next generation: Trauma and nostalgia. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 18(3): 294–306.
- Gerson JM and Wolf DL (2007) Introduction. In: Gerson JM and Wolf DL (eds) *Sociology Confronts the Holocaust*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 1–10.
- Gil I (2013) Between reception and self-perception: Testimonies of Holocaust survivors in Israel. *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12(3): 493–515.
- Goffman E (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin.
- Granata A and Sarcinelli AS (2012) Children's views on parents' tales: Intergenerational transmission among transnational minorities. *New Cultural Frontiers* 3: 69–90.
- Hirsch M (2008) The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today* 29(1): 103–128.
- Hirsch M and Spitzer L (2009) The witness in the archive: Holocaust studies/memory studies. *Memory Studies* 2(2): 151–170.
- Hoffman E (2005) *After Such Knowledge: A Meditation on the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. London: Vintage.
- Hoffman E (2010) The long afterlife of loss. In: Radstone S and Schwartz B (eds) *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 406–415.
- Jacobs J (2016) *The Holocaust Across Generations: Trauma and Its Inheritance Among Descendants of Survivors*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jones CP (2000) Stigma and tattoo. In: Caplan J (ed.) *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. London: Reaktion Books, pp. 17–31.
- Kidron CA (2003) Surviving a distant past: A case study of the cultural construction of trauma descendant identity. *Ethos* 31(4): 513–544.
- Kidron CA (2009) Toward an ethnography of silence: The lived presence of the past in the everyday life of Holocaust trauma survivors and their descendants in Israel. *Current Anthropology* 50(1): 5–27.

- Kidron CA (2012) Breaching the wall of traumatic silence: Holocaust survivor and descendant person–object relations and the material transmission of the genocidal past. *Journal of Material Culture* 17(1): 3–21.
- Kidron CA (2013) Being there together: Dark family tourism and the emotive experience of co-presence in the Holocaust past. *Annals of Tourism Research* 41: 171–194.
- Kidron CA (2020) Emancipatory voice and the recursivity of authentic silence: Holocaust descendant accounts of the dialectic between silence and voice. *History and Anthropology*. DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2020.1726907.
- Kidron CA, Kotliar DM and Kirmayer LJ (2019) Transmitted trauma as badge of honor: Phenomenological accounts of Holocaust descendant resilient vulnerability. *Social Science and Medicine* 239: 1–9.
- Klar Y, Schori-Eyal N and Klar Y (2013) The ‘never again’ state of Israel: The emergence of the Holocaust as a core feature of Israeli identity and its four incongruent voices. *Journal of Social Issues* 69(1): 125–143.
- Klik E (2017) Customizing memory: Number tattoos in contemporary Israeli memory work. *Memory Studies* 13(4): 649–661.
- Kluger R (2001) *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*. New York: Feminist Press.
- Lentin R (2001) *Memory and Forgetting: Gendered Counter Narratives of Silence in the Relations between Israeli Zionism and the Shoah (2001EUI RSC, 2001/08)*. Florence: European University Institute. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/1717> (accessed 15 August 2021).
- Levi P (2017 [1986]) *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Rosenthal R. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Lev-Wiesel R (2007) Intergenerational transmission of trauma across three generations: A preliminary study. *Qualitative Social Work* 6(1): 75–94.
- Martel S (2016) Commemorative tattoos as visual-material media. In: Davidson D (ed.) *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars, pp. 31–38.
- Navon D (2015) ‘We are a people, one people’: How 1967 transformed Holocaust memory and Jewish identity in Israel and the US. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 28(3): 342–373.
- Radstone S and Schwartz B (2010) Introduction: Mapping memory. In: Radstone S and Schwartz B (eds) *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 1–10.
- Rubin A (1988) Tattoo renaissance. In: Rubin A (ed.) *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 233–264.
- Sagi-Schwartz A, van IJzendoorn MH and Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ (2008) Does intergenerational transmission of trauma skip a generation? No meta-analytic evidence for tertiary traumatization with third generation of Holocaust survivors. *Attachment & Human Development* 10(2): 105–121.
- Schult T (2017) From stigma to medal of honor and agent of remembrance: Auschwitz tattoos and generational change. In: Henderson M and Lange J (eds) *Entangled Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a Global Age*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, pp. 257–291.
- Sharma V (2009) Inherited memories: Second generation partition narratives from Punjabi families in Delhi and Lahore. *Cultural and Social History* 6(4): 411–428.
- Smart C (2011) ‘Families, Secrets and Memories’, *Sociology* 45(4): 539–553.
- Stein A (2016) *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stern J (2000) The Eichmann trial and its influence on psychiatry and psychology. *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 1(2): 393–428.
- Tyler I (2020) *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality*. London: Zed Books.



- Weissman G (2004) *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Welzer H (2010) Re-narrations: How pasts change in conversational remembering. *Memory Studies* 3(1): 5–17.
- Wiewiorka A (1999) *The Era of the Witness*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Wiseman H, Metz E and Barber JP (2006) Anger, guilt, and intergenerational communication of trauma in the interpersonal narratives of second generation Holocaust survivors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76(2): 176–184.
- Wolf DL (2007) Holocaust testimony: Producing post-memories, producing identity. In: Gerson JM and Wolf DL (eds) *Sociology Confronts the Holocaust*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 154–184.
- Wolf DL (2017) What's in a name? The genealogy of Holocaust identities. *Genealogy* 1(4). DOI: 10.333390/genealogy1040019.
- Wolf DL (2019) Postmemories of joy? Children of Holocaust survivors and alternative family memories. *Memory Studies* 12(1): 74–87.
- Yablonka H (2003) The development of Holocaust consciousness in Israel: The Nuremberg, Kapos, Kastner, and Eichmann trials. *Israel Studies* 8(3): 1–24.

### Author biography

**Alice Bloch** is Professor of Sociology and Head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester. She researches and writes in the area of refugee and forced migration studies and her authored books include *Living on the Margins: Undocumented Migrants in a Global City*, with Sonia McKay; *Sans Papiers: The Social and Economic Lives of Young Undocumented Migrants in the UK*, with Nando Sigona and Roger Zetter; and a recently edited collected with Giorgia Dona, *Forced Migration: Current Issues and Debates* (Routledge, 2019).