

*This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast ‘Why some descendants of Holocaust survivors choose to replicate a loved one’s Auschwitz tattoo,’ published on January 25, 2024.*

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**Gemma Ware:** People who arrived at the Auschwitz concentration camp, who weren't sent to immediate death in the gas chambers, were given a tattoo, a number on their forearm. For those who survived the Holocaust, this tattoo remained as a visual symbol of the crimes of the Nazis. Now, some descendants of Holocaust survivors are replicating that Auschwitz tattoo.

**Orly Weintraub Gilad:** I did the number, but not in the original font. The numbers are bigger and the font is designed. I combined the number by small green leaves between the leaves. It's possible to see my three children's first letter of their name.

**Gemma Ware:** In this episode, we found out what motivates people to replicate the number and hear about the reactions they've had to their tattoo. I'm Gemma Ware and you're listening to The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts.

So we've got a moving story for you today and I'm joined to help tell it by Dale Berning Sawa, who's a commissioning editor at The Conversation in the UK. Welcome, Dale.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** Thanks for having me, Gemma.

**Gemma Ware:** Dale, every year on January 27, the world marks Holocaust Memorial Day and you've been working on a story around that. Tell me what drew you to this story in particular.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** So it's been 79 years. This year is the 79th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and of the Holocaust and the idea that there are fewer and fewer people around who went through it who experienced the camps and who can tell us firsthand what they experienced. The idea that there are less and less of them around is a scary one. What happens when there are no survivors left to remind people of what was done? And so I've been thinking a lot about that, about the tools in place for keeping the memory of what happened alive.

**Gemma Ware:** And you've been talking to a researcher who found a specific group of people, the family of Holocaust survivors, who've done something which some people might find quite startling.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** Yeah, so Alice Bloch is a professor of sociology at Manchester University in the UK. And, she told me a story about watching a documentary from 2012 called 'Numbered', in which a number of Holocaust survivors in Israel were interviewed. People who had been to Auschwitz and had been forcibly tattooed with a number on their arm and had lived with that number ever since. And, among the interviewees were also descendants, so some children, some grandchildren, who had decided to replicate the number of their grandparent or parent on their own body. And Alice was really intrigued by that gesture, and she wanted to speak to other descendants of Holocaust survivors who had decided to do the same thing.

**Alice Bloch:** As a sociologist, I was really interested in the sort of intersections between the body and memory and how that bore out. How do you memorialize through the body, specifically this, what you might term a sort of traumatic tattoo, something that was imposed and forced on an ancestor?

**Dale Berning Sawa:** The Auschwitz concentration camp complex in Nazi-occupied Poland was the only concentration camp where prisoners received tattoos. First, this applied to prisoners in the infirmary or to be executed. Then, in 1941 to Soviet prisoners of war sent to forced labour. From spring 1942, all Jewish prisoners not sent to the gas chambers were systematically tattooed on their forearms. Alice started thinking about what would make someone want to replicate something so symbolic of the crimes of the Nazis on their own body.

**Alice Bloch:** So when I started the project and still I suppose now, I wanted to take, in a sense, the genealogy of the tattoo, from first noticing it on the ancestor's body, through to talking about it with the ancestor and other family members, to thinking about getting the tattoo, to getting it, the physical act of getting the tattoo.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** Finding people who'd done this was a challenge. Alice got in touch with the directors of the 'Numbered' documentary. She turned to social media. She scoured the web for anyone who'd already spoken publicly about getting such a tattoo, and she sought out social media connections. One of the people she came into contact with was Orly Weintraub Gilad.

**Orly Weintraub Gilad:** My full name is Orly Weintraub Gilad. I live in Gilon. It's north of Israel, a little village, and I am 45 years old.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** Orly has her maternal grandfather, Samuel Kestenbaum's number, A12599, tattooed on her right inner arm. It's written in calligraphic italics with a delicate green vine weaving between and around the numbers. From the tips of some leaves emerge the initials of her children and her husband's names. She redrew the number in this way, she says, because her grandparents always told her that their victory over the Nazis was their family.

**Orly Weintraub Gilad:** The fact that they started a family is proof that the Nazis failed in their job. Also, the leaves are green because I love nature. So what did I try to do is to do it for me. I can really feel it's mine.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** The number, as I understand it, is specifically the number that your maternal grandfather had on his arm. Is that right?

**Orly Weintraub Gilad:** Yes, that's right. Samuel Kestenbaum, or in Hungarian, Shawnee Kestenbaum.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** She says the tattoo is also for her grandmother, Agi, who was also sent to the death camp. But because she wasn't expected to live, she was never given a number.

**Orly Weintraub Gilad:** She was 15 when she got to Auschwitz. It was in June 1944. When they got down from the train, they were lined up for Dr. Mengele, who sent children and mothers and elderly people to the gas chambers, and the younger, healthier, go outside for the work. And while she was waiting in the line with her mother and her younger brother, a prisoner asked her age. She was 15, and the prisoner told her to say that she was 18. Otherwise... he told her, you will turn into smoke, and then he just disappeared. That's why she's alive. That was the last time she saw her mother and brother. They were immediately sent to the gas chambers.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** Orly's paternal grandparents were also Holocaust survivors, but they passed away before she had the chance to ask them about what they had experienced. So she doesn't know their stories.

Another person Alice interviewed is David Rubin. David is 38 and from Israel, but he lives in Liverpool in the UK. His grandmother, Piroska Lévy, everyone knew her as Perl, who was sent to Auschwitz in 1944 with her parents and her siblings. David bears her number A6615 on his arm. Like Orly, he also wanted his tattoo to tell a story.

**David Rubin:** One of my favorite colors of my grandmother was purple. So all the flowers are purple. So there are seven flowers which symbolizes the seven kids. So, my grandmother and her six sisters and brother. Then you have the wires that were around Auschwitz Birkenau on the fence which I've turned into thorns but it's a flower so there's a positivity into it. The way they've done the tattoo is at the beginning, wasn't a machine, it was done by wooden plank with nails in the shape of a number which they hit on the arm with ink to tattoo it into the arm.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** David says that he wanted the tattoo to be more than just a replica of the number. He wanted the elements to work together to tell a story.

**David Rubin:** It's not a story of an individual person surviving the Holocaust. It's the story of the family and for me, it was more about the family, so it's everyone. It's the whole story about everything that happened.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** He says it's at once a private conversation within his family and an opportunity for people to ask questions about the Holocaust.

**David Rubin:** Why the flowers? Why the wood? Why the wire? And why the shape? So if anyone would ever ask me the question, it's a conversation.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** All the people Alice has spoken to have replicated the number in very different ways. Some, like Orly and David, have redesigned it in a way that tells their family story. Others have opted for an identical copy.

**Alice Bloch:** Some people chose exact replicas of the ancestor's number. And when I mean that, I mean in terms of the size of the tattoo, the positioning on the body as well. A few people took a photograph of the relative's number to the tattoo artist and asked for a replica. In fact, one person even took his father to the tattoo artist with him and asked him to replicate the number.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** So in terms of the reasons that people gave, what did they tell you about why they got their tattoos?

**Alice Bloch:** So the reasons for replicating the number tattoo varied, but there were some patterns that emerged. And I think the strongest thing was about love. It was about love and family relationships and cherishing the person who had survived the Holocaust. It was also about keeping the memory, keeping their memory alive, but keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive more generally because it offered the opportunity to talk about the Holocaust and about family stories. And in some cases, it was also a way of expressing love when it was impossible to do that through words. It was a non-verbal way of communicating the strength of a relationship.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** Alice says that now, as more time has passed since the Holocaust, gestures like those of Orly and David become particularly important.

**Alice Bloch:** As we enter what you could call a post-witness era, there's very few people now around to tell the stories, their own story. And for some of the people I spoke to, it's that very fact, means that they want to have that number on their body

because it offers the opportunity to relate those stories. David, for example, said to me that it's a way of talking to his children about his grandmother's story, so they are fourth-generation survivors.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** David got his tattoo about two years ago, but he'd been thinking about doing it since his eldest daughter was born. When Alice spoke to him for her research, he told her that some people in his family initially struggled to understand why he would want to replicate his grandmother's tattoo.

**David Rubin:** It's not an easy tattoo, I'll be honest. So, it is, for instance, people in my family, some people have agreed, some people had disagreements about the tattoo. However, after a while when we all met in Hungary at some point, they all wanted to see the tattoo.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** He told me people had a lot of questions and anger too, but the way he looks at it is different.

**David Rubin:** I have nothing to be ashamed of and what people need to realize is that the people that had the tattoo, the people that had the number, they are the survivors. So, for me, this number means being alive. It means something else to me. So it took me a while to get them on board until we could actually have a conversation.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** But David says that to him what matters most is the meaning the tattoo holds for himself.

**David Rubin:** I'm not here to change the world. It's mainly a private thing, but obviously, when I went to the Synagogue and the Rabbi seen the tattoo, he was overwhelmed and it made some very old people in the community here in Liverpool cry. It wasn't my aim. It's my private thing. I'm not here to show it to people. I'm here to answer a question if somebody has one. Obviously in the UK, I don't think there's much awareness of what the tattoo means, I'll be honest. If I would go to Israel for instance, and I would have my arm out, people would understand much more what that means.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** It's a very moving thing to see the photographs of a young arm, of young skin, with that number. Whenever you see the tattoo on your arm, do you feel the weight of that?

**David Rubin:** Young arm, old soul. I think the Holocaust didn't just impact the people that were in the Holocaust, it impacted their generations to come. So, you can see by the stories and you can see by the way that we've been brought up, for instance, most examples you'll hear from Holocaust survivors, grandkids and so on, is the food. You have to finish the food and there's no way there's going to be a lack of food because there is always have to be food in the fridge, sometimes overflowing. And that is because of the lack of food that they had and the fact that they want to make sure that everyone has it. But yes, there is a lot of weight to this tattoo. We counted how many of our own family members had died in Auschwitz, which was over a thousand people, just of our own family. That includes everyone from every side of our family. So, that is how significant it is.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** One of Alice's interviewees talks about wanting to make sure that there would still be people walking with the number. Another about her tattoo being a way to keep her grandmother walking with her for good. David says the imperative comes from this fear that soon there won't be people around to explain what was done to them.

**David Rubin:** They do learn about it in school, but I remember when I was learning in school, about the Holocaust, you talk very dry figures, very dry detail. You don't really go into it and find it from a first person or somebody that was there, explain about the trains and how it smelled and how many people walked out of the train and how many hours they had to walk and how much break they had. You don't hear that in any book, you don't, you can't learn that in school. They're going to teach you the generic article about the Holocaust and what happened. But learning it firsthand, we are the last generation that can pass it on properly.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** David wasn't able to talk with his grandmother about getting the tattoo. He wanted to, but it wasn't something he says that he could do over the phone or on Zoom. And then COVID happened. Perl passed away before David could visit her to ask about it. So instead, he had it done after she passed away.

This close relationship between grandparent and grandchild comes up again and again in Alice's research. More than the children of Holocaust survivors, it is the grandchildren who often have been able to ask questions.

**Alice Bloch:** So one of the things that struck me, and it's replicated in a lot of the writing about the Holocaust, is that the Holocaust survivor tends to talk more to the grandchild than the child. It sort of skips a generation and one of the people I spoke to, who is the grandchild of a survivor in the US, her grandmother spoke to her a lot about her stories and never really spoke to her son. And she thought it was really that this generational difference was really because the trauma was too new. It wasn't yet possible to speak about it. But by the time the grandchildren came along, they wanted to tell their stories and they wanted people to know. And I think talking to some children of Holocaust survivors, for this research, I think that came through too that, it was much harder. The silences were definitely there.

One person I spoke to, Sarah, said to me that every time, her and her brother tried to talk to her father, a Auschwitz survivor about his experiences, he would go to bed for days with a migraine. And they knew not to talk to him about it, not to ask questions.

**Dale Berning Sawa:** When I spoke to Orly, we also spoke about her relationship to her grandmother, Agi, who is now 95. When you decided to get your tattoo and you did it, did you discuss it with your grandmother first?

**Orly Weintraub Gilad:** Yeah, of course. Before I got it, I went to her and ask her for permission because I wouldn't have done it if she hadn't agreed. I think it's triggering a trauma and I didn't want that she feel bad or something. To my surprise, despite her dislike for her tattoos, she was very excited about this. She was very moved and understand the meaning. Until, I think, to this day, she always shows this when we are together and tell everybody, that wants to hear, that I got the tattoo. She's very proud of it. It makes her very good because she understands that we're going to tell her story too.



**Dale Berning Sawa:** Alice has interviewed 16 people so far, who've chosen to memorialize the Holocaust on their own body in this way. She says it is a small but growing trend.

**Alice Bloch:** Tattoos are, they've had a renaissance since really the last 20-30 years. People have tattoos and people want tattoos that are meaningful and meaningful tattoos include tattoos that memorialize and commemorate and this tattoo would fall into that bracket. It's about bonds, it's about continuing bonds, it's about families, it's about remembering.

**Gemma Ware:** That's it for this week's episode. Thanks to Alice Bloch for talking to us about her research and to Orly Weintraub Gilad and David Rubin, who shared their stories with us. And thanks to Dale Berning Sawa who brought us this episode. You can read a long-read article that Alice wrote about her research in The Conversations 'Insights' series. We'll put a link to that in our show notes.

This episode of the Conversation Weekly was produced by Mend Mariwany and Gemma Ware and written by Dale Berning Sawa. Sound Design was by Eloise Stevens and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media, and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts.

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