

REMEMBER

and her grandson,
Daniel Philosoph:
4559.

More than 70 years after the Holocaust, some young Israelis are memorializing their families' suffering on their own skin

BY JODI RUDOREN IN JERUSALEM

When Eli Sagir showed her grandfather, Yosef Diamant, the new tattoo on her left forearm, he bent his head to kiss it.

Diamant had the same tattoo, the number 157622, permanently inked on his own arm by the Nazis at Auschwitz, the most notorious of the concentration camps Germany set up across Europe during World War II.

Nearly 70 years later, his granddaughter got hers at a hip tattoo parlor in downtown Jerusalem, Israel's capital, after a high school trip to Poland. The next week, her mother and brother had the six digits inscribed onto their forearms.

"All my generation knows nothing about the Holocaust," says Sagir, 21, who has now had the tattoo for four years. "You talk with people and they think it's like the Exodus from Egypt, ancient history. I decided to do it to remind my generation: I want to tell them my grandfather's story and the Holocaust story."

Diamant's descendants are among a handful of children and grandchildren of Auschwitz survivors memorializing some of the darkest days of Jewish history on their own bodies. With the number of living Holocaust survivors in Israel falling to about 200,000 from 400,000 a decade ago, Israel is grappling with how to remember the Holocaust—so integral to Israel's founding and identity—after

▶ **LISTEN TO AUDIO**

"Why I Got My Tattoo"

WWW.UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM



Jewish children
at Auschwitz, 1945

those who lived it are gone.

In 1941, Germany began carrying out the Final Solution, a plan for the extermination of Europe's 9.5 million Jews. By the end of World War II in 1945, six million Jews had been killed, along with many Gypsies, homosexuals, and others the Nazis considered undesirable.

Today, rite-of-passage trips to the Nazi death camps, like the one Sagir took, are standard for Israeli high school students. It's one way of getting the attention of young people who otherwise might not give the Holocaust a lot of thought.

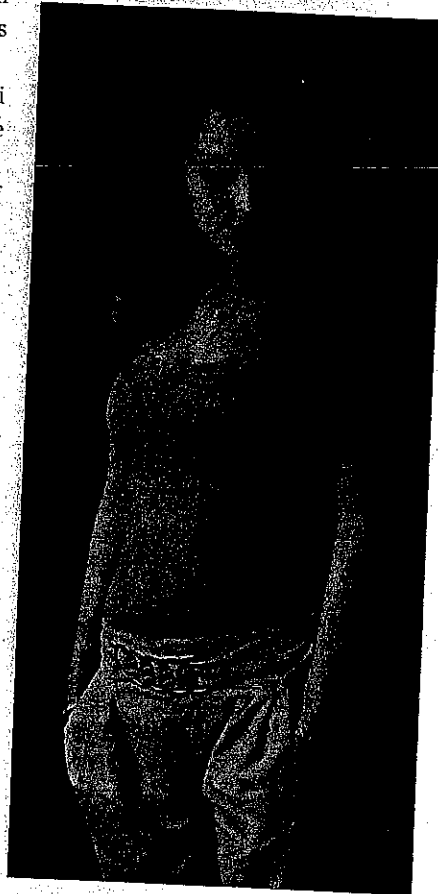
"We are moving from lived memory to historical memory," says Michael Berenbaum, a professor at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. "We're at that transition, and this is sort of a brazen, in-your-face way of bridging it."

The tattoo is perhaps the most profound symbol of the Holocaust's dehumanization of its victims. Tattooing was introduced at Auschwitz in southern Poland in the autumn of 1941, and at the adjacent Birkenau camp the next March. They were the only concentration camps that did it. A needle device was used to stamp the digits into the skin and then ink was rubbed into the bleeding wound. It's unclear how many people were branded this way, usually on the left forearm.

Only those deemed fit for work were tattooed, so despite the degradation, the numbers were in some cases worn

"All my generation knows nothing about the Holocaust."

—ELI SAGIR, 21



Eli Sagir had her arm tattooed with the same numbers—157622—the Nazis put on her grandfather's arm at Auschwitz.

with pride—particularly lower numbers, which meant someone survived several brutal winters in the camp.

After the war, however, some Auschwitz survivors rushed to remove the tattoos through surgery or hid them under long sleeves.

Those who choose to get Holocaust tattoos today say they want to be intimately, eternally bonded to their survivor-relatives. And they want a constant reminder of this horrible episode from the past to help make sure it never happens again.

It's an intensely personal decision that often provokes ugly interactions with strangers. The debate is complicated by the fact that tattooing is prohibited by Jewish law, because any desecration of the body is considered an insult to God. (Some survivors have long feared, incorrectly, that their tattooed numbers would prevent them from being buried in Jewish cemeteries.)

"The biggest problem with using tattoos as remembrance is that the vast majority of Holocaust victims were never tattooed; they were simply murdered outright," says Henry Greenspan, who teaches the Holocaust at the University of Michigan. "Even among survivors, a minority bear tattoos."

Sagir, a cashier at a market in the heart of Jerusalem, says she is asked about the number 10 times a day. There was one man who called her "pathetic," saying of her grandfather, "You're trying to be him and take his suffering."

And there was a police officer who said, "God creates the forgetfulness so we can forget," Sagir recalls. "I told her, 'Because of people like you who want to forget this, we will have it again.'"

Dana Doron, a 31-year-old daughter of a survivor, recently made a documentary about Holocaust tattoos.

"To me, it's a scar," she says. "The fact that young people are choosing to get the tattoos is, in my eyes, a sign that we're still carrying the scar of the Holocaust." •

With additional reporting by Patricia Smith