



Ron Folman, left, with his father Yeshayahu Folman. (Alex Levac)

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Holocaust Remembrance Day

Son gets Dad's Auschwitz tattoo on own arm

By Yair Ettinger, Haaretz Correspondent

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One day about eight years ago, Dr. Ron Folman walked into a tattoo studio on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street accompanied by his parents, Professor Yeshayahu and Dr. Ahuva Folman. He asked his father to bare his left forearm, and told the tattooist: "I want an exact copy of that tattoo."

The original inscription, B1367, was seared by a German soldier into the arm of the 10-year-old child Yeshayahu Folman in June 1944, on the day he was brought to Auschwitz. The boy had been sent alone from Piotrkow in Poland, and did not know what happened to his parents, whom he would find only after the war.

After surviving selections and three years in the Blizhin and Treblinka camps, Folman - who describes himself "a survivor, like a field mouse" - survived Auschwitz as well.

Since his arrival at the age of 13 at the Ben Shemen youth village - where he learned how to read and write- through his army service, academic studies, lecturing at the Hebrew University's agriculture department, serving as the Agriculture Ministry's chief scientist and volunteering for UN work in Africa, he has done all he could "not to convey personal trauma."

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He did the same while he and his wife raised three children. He did not hide a thing from his family, but believes the Holocaust

should be remembered "in a public and national, rather than personal, way."

Forty-six years after that day in Auschwitz,

Yeshayahu Folman found himself in the tattoo studio with a strange man copying digit by digit from his arm to his son's, carefully duplicating the exact shade, size and spot. The act followed months of family debates.

Yeshayahu Folman was appalled by the idea and tried to prevent his son from doing it, but eventually cooperated.

"It was an act of solidarity with me," he says. "Of course I was moved, but I was not in favor of it. I still believe that he is burdening himself with a weight he will carry for life. That is unnecessary as far as he and his children are concerned. It pains me to feel that I'm transferring it to him."

He refuses to bare his arm for a joint photograph with his son. "I was a victim against my will. I don't have to display my coercion, especially since I was so young. You," he addresses his son, "since you chose it, don't convey wretchedness. Good or bad, it's your choice."

Two events in 2000 brought Ron Folman to decide to engrave the number on his flesh - his father was hospitalized with a disease, and Ron was preparing for a long trip to Germany for completing his post-doctorate studies. He had served as a fighter pilot in the air force, volunteered for Amnesty, and had a successful academic career. Everything was woven somehow in the Holocaust story, and the Zionist and humanist values he was raised on.

But the trip to Germany, he says, was about to close a circle. He was headed for the University of Heidelberg, the first university to kick out all its Jewish students and lecturers when Hitler rose to power.

"I was the first Jew to hold a position in the University of Heidelberg's physics department since 1933," he says. "But the tattoo wasn't because of Germany, at least not consciously. Nor was it done as a demonstration or public statement. It was about my relationship with my father, and the family members who survived and those who didn't. My father was sick at the time, and for the first time I felt in real danger of losing him. It was purely emotional. I didn't think of the meanings. It was the act of a man who sees his father in the hospital and suddenly all the years he absorbed, between the lines, the great pain, the tears - everything burst out. Until then I suppressed feelings associated with the Holocaust, but when I saw him lying there I felt I had to, wanted to, make a private statement about my feelings toward him and the Holocaust. It was a desire to tell him that his son understands what he had been through and shares his pain."

"As for the Holocaust, perhaps it was to tell myself I'd never forget."

Ron Folman, a quantum physics expert and lecturer at Ben-Gurion University, says "I've always had a strong need for hard facts. Beyond all the feelings around the Holocaust and the talks with my father, I had a need for something factual. The number on the arm was the only factual thing we had left from the Holocaust. I asked for an exact copy, but he blew it. He used different fonts. The Germans made the digit 3 with a round font, but this tattooist made a 3 with a flat top. The 3 irritated me."

The tattoo evoked numerous responses on a daily basis both in Israel and overseas.

"When I'm asked about it I avoid the question," he says. "The number is only important to me as far as my daughters are concerned. I don't know how many stories they'll get to hear from their grandparents, so it's important to me that they see the number and maybe ask questions about it," he says.

Yeshayahu Folman says he has never thought of having the number removed.

"I've heard of people who do that; I don't believe in escaping, especially not from history. It happened, the people who lived through it have no choice, they must bear it as best they can, but why pass the personal emotional burden on to the next generation?"

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