

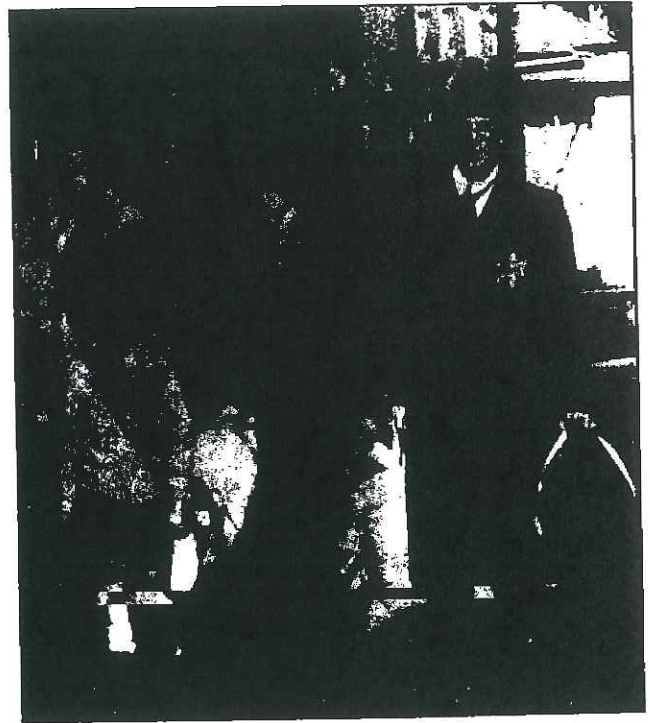
THE TATTOO

*The Nazis used several methods to set apart Jews and other non-Aryans. Jews were forced to wear a yellow star sewn on their clothing. The identity cards they had to carry were stamped with a large J for Jude or Jew. And numbers were tattooed on their skin at some of the concentration camps. Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, describes the tattooing process in this excerpt from *The Drowned and the Saved*.*

Altogether different is what must be said about the tattoo, an autochthonous¹ Auschwitzian invention. From the beginning in 1942 in Auschwitz and the Lagers² under its jurisdiction (in 1944 they were about forty) prisoner registration numbers were no longer only sewed to the clothes but tattooed on the left forearm. Only non-Jewish German prisoners were exempt from this rule. The operation was performed with methodical rapidity by specialized "scribes" at the moment of the new arrival's registration, when coming from freedom, other camps, or the ghettos. In deference³ to the typically German talent for classification, a true and proper code soon began to take shape: men were tattooed on the outside of the arm and women on the inside; the numbers of the *Zigeuner*, the gypsies, had to be preceded by a Z. The number of a Jew, starting in May 1944 (that is, with the mass arrival of Hungarian Jews) had to be preceded by an A, which shortly after was replaced by a B. Until September 1944 there were no children in Auschwitz; they were all killed by gas on arrival. After this date, there began to arrive entire families of Poles arrested at random during the Warsaw insurrection: all of them were tattooed, including newborn babies.

This operation was not very painful and lasted no more than a minute, but it was traumatic. Its symbolic meaning was clear to everyone: this is an indelible⁴ 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,⁵ an end in itself, pure offense: were the three canvas numbers sewed to pants, jackets, and winter coat not enough? No, they were not enough: something more was needed, a non-verbal message, so that the inno-

cent would feel his sentence written on his flesh. It was also a return to barbarism, all the more perturbing for Orthodox Jews:⁶ in fact, precisely in order to distinguish Jews from the barbarians, the tattoo is forbidden by Mosaic law⁷ (Leviticus 19:28).



A Jewish family forced to wear the yellow star

¹ *autochthonous*: native; begun in a particular location, in this case Auschwitz

² *Lagers*: depots where prisoners were assembled and assigned to camps

³ *deference*: obedience

⁴ *indelible*: unable to be removed or washed away; permanent

⁵ *gratuitous*: uncalled for

⁶ *Orthodox Jews*: Jews who strictly follow the teachings of the Torah and Talmud

⁷ *Mosaic Law*: the laws of Moses, a great biblical leader