

The Last Tattoo

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It wasn't popular, but everyone had to get one. Each person waiting in line appeared confident of their turn. Yet, here and there, nervous ones tapped their feet, rolled eyes and stood folding and unfolding readied arms. Exhaled gusts and loud coughs emitted from grouchy, tired faces, and not a few showed that they feared the pain of the needle, but everyone guarded their place in line.

Doubts ran through the minds of the impatient, but none asked, "Why this trend, this movement? Why now? I wish I didn't have to do what everyone does and go along with the crowd!" They reasoned much, but did not find one valid answer. Nobody likes to wait for what others already have and many will be getting soon.

When a person's arm was tattooed, they didn't show it off. Though this permanent change to their body cost much, no pride emerged when they got up and left. With so many waiting and then leaving, wearing essentially the same image, none were impressed or envious. No one. The few onlookers, who were exempt from such an apparent necessity, merely smirked.

Nervous shoving and elbowing plagued the line. People jostled and backed into each other. Occasionally a snarl caught everyone's attention.

This waiting and boredom beckoned various temptations of impatience. A woman stomped on the feet of a young girl who had accidentally stepped on her toes. It didn't matter that the teen slumped and stumbled due to not having any food or drink for hours. The priority which lay ahead stole right through her last mealtime. She knew the choices, but this one was more pressing.

Smacking tongues clicked on dry mouths desiring a soothing drink. Throats moaned wishing for a snack. Feet shuffled forward as the person farthest in front rose from the wooden stool.

"Finished! Next." A man seated at a table, holding the tattoo needle, also called to his assistant for more ink. With mindless motion, heels clicked, feet moved. The face of this apprentice was a flat, expressionless.

Most newcomers who sat for the inking winced. Some tried to hide their scowls. The sanitary conditions disappointed them. They'd expected better. After all, this tattoo might be the only one for the rest of their lives. True, the popular design plagued the country, literally

tens of thousands bore it. But, no one felt self-importance when they recognized it. Second thoughts might well up, shame, a shake of the head – but what could they do?

The tattooist grumbled, looking at the long line and thinking of the many hours already behind him and those still ahead. The shop now had two shifts and remained open seven days a week. He said to no one, “Safety! Maintenance! Equipment! All changed! Now it’s the left arm, always the left arm. Someone, somewhere made the decision and it stuck. That’s what they want...and it’s always now, now, now!” Still holding the cast iron tattoo gun, he thrust up his hand, swaying his raised arm to punctuate these statements.

The motor of his machine innocently hummed beside him.

His list of personal complaints stopped when a large man stepped in front of him and stubbornly proclaimed, “Stop this! Stop this now! It’s not good for society! I am a Jew and this marking of the skin is against our religion!” This outburst caused the tattooist to look up and stare hard at the man who wore a black hat and black coat, plus a long, bushy beard.

After a moment’s consideration the worker cocked his head to one side motioning for the protester to quiet down, move out of the way, and not block the line. He slowly lowered his head and tended to the newest female arm gripped in his hand.

His drooping features revealed a face devoid of compassion, sympathy, or desire for any sincere personal connection. The long hours and endless repetition caused him to shake his head side to side. What had once been a creative career now lulled into a grinding, patent routine. He’d hoped for better use of his time at a job. After a snort of disgust he mumbled, “Vanity!”

Months ago, he stopped looking into the faces and only at the left arm. He didn’t care – didn’t want to care. *Why chat? No point in small talk.* He’d heard all the stories, nothing really surprised him anymore.

“Ouch!” The woman said, “Please hurry! This doesn’t tickle.”

In a monotone he replied, “Only one more number, then you’re done.”

At that moment, sirens sounded, dogs barked. Vehicles started, revved up and drove off. Shouting came from every direction. The tattooist blinked. His grip on the woman’s wrist relaxed. He tilted his head and listened. His hand reached over and switched off the machine. A thin smile broadened. He lay the needle gun down.

A parched voice repeated a cry heard from outside of the building, “It must be the Soviets or Americans! Finally! Someone’s come!”

The seated woman looked at the fresh ink forever etched into her life that would mark this liberating moment of history. The tattoo, with the last digit almost completed read, "202,499."

The End

Historical Note: During the Holocaust, the Nazis tattooing introduced at the concentration camp complex of Auschwitz (the largest in Europe, drawing Jews from 29 countries). This started in the autumn of 1941 and remained in use until January 1945, ending with the number 202,499. Auschwitz is also in its own way, the largest cemetery in the world.

Despite the common perception that all Holocaust prisoners received tattoos, only the ones in or from Auschwitz were branded this way.

German SS officers sorted the prisoners into two lines: those sent to the right?—immediately killed in the gas chambers. Those to the left worked in forced labor camps. Their heads and entire bodies shaved. Personal possessions removed. Only prisoners selected for work were officially registered for identification purposes and issued serial numbers. Due to a series of changes in record keeping, the actual tally of those tattooed surpassed 202,499.

Author's Note: This short story is fictionalized historical account. I encourage all readers to research precise accounts on the Holocaust.

Yom Hashoah, International Holocaust Remembrance Day April 8th 2021