

Chapter 4

Tattoos woven into biographies

Apart from their role in defining the identity by specifying, closing and capturing the “I” in the form of an image recorded on the body, many of the narratives I collected also featured the idea of tattoos being “woven” into the individuals’ life history, the various lifeworlds, experiences and events that had happened in the past, often many years before the conversation took place. The form of interview I chose was certainly conducive to this. Instead of focusing on current or short-term self-definition, I tended to invite my interlocutors to refer to the wider context of their lives, i.e. their biographies. This format led many of them to search in their memories for tattoos that they had had done several years, or even a decade or two previously, seeking to reconstruct their motivations, desires, fascinations and situation, and thus also for a picture of themselves from many years before. I was thus able to grasp the processual nature, dynamic and variability inherent in the process of body tattooing. This also allowed me to record the way in which the motivations that led my interviewees to get involved in this kind of modification had changed, how they had renegotiated them under the influence of various factors – in their biographies as well as their immediate or further environments – and what role tattoos had played in various phases or at different moments of their lives.

This way in which tattoos are meshed into individuals’ biographies also seemed particularly interesting to me in the context of the variability and fluidity of the tattoo projects in which my interviewees engaged. Frequently these were, as Scott Lash (2001: ix) so evocatively put it, “combinards” putting together an “I” made up of a “bricolage” of transitory or short-term cultural images, constantly searching for a new, more authentic and satisfactory forms of self-expression. When analysing the narratives I collected, I was often faced with what seemed to be important questions: in what way do my interlocutors give meaning to the many diverse “packages”, forms of expression and images of themselves which they capture in the form of a tattoo? How do they “package” something that is incessantly changing? How do they try to explain all their many complications in the various – sometimes entirely incoherent – images, pictures and stories that go with their different tattoos? What significance do tattoos have from the point of view of the biographies of the participants in the study? In the following section I shall attempt to respond to these questions, paying special attention to the way in which my interviewees referred to their tattoo-related past and to the changes in their tattoo designs, how they described and justified the dynamic of their commitment to various forms and “aesthetics”, and above all, the role they ascribed to tattoos when talking about their lives and experiences.

For my analysis of the strategies the individuals used to “give biographical meaning” to their tattoos and incorporate them in the wider context of their life stories, I used the category of “biographical work” established in sociology for many years (in the writings of such scholars as Anselm Strauss, Fritz Schütze and Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal) and employed in many biographical studies devoted to identity processes (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008; Kaźmierska 2008). In these studies biographical work is above all seen as an interpretive

process that allows individuals to attach meaning to their own biographies and own identities, and gain a certain specific perspective on their own experiences and the events that affect them. As noted by Strauss, the author of *Continual Permutations of Action*, the objective of biographical work is to lend a certain coherence to one's own life and give meaning to the messy multitude of past events and ideas on oneself. This then leads an individual to perform "review, maintenance, repair, and alteration" of his/her biography (Strauss 1993: 98; cf. 1959). According to Strauss, biographical work, entailing maintaining an internal dialogue and attempting to attain a coherent image of the "I", can emerge when there is a direct threat to the coherence of the individual's identity (Strauss 1993: 99), faced with the loss of control over one's own fate, body or environment caused by, for instance, terminal illness, or any other circumstances that confront the individual with the contradictions and problematic nature of experience. Schütze, the father of the German biographical method, also stresses that the biographical work done by the individual leads one to "establish or re-establish ultimate meaning for one's own existence, for everyday life situations and significant social relationships" (Schütze 1992: 358). It involves attempting to make a constructive reinterpretation of the course of one's own life in the face of a sense of a lack of control, apathy and suffering caused by structural factors, which this author, after Glaser and Strauss, calls "trajectory" (cf. Riemann and Schütze 1992).

Partly owing to the nature of the object of my research, I propose a perspective which treats biographical work not so much as a strategy of confronting existential traumas and critical situations that constitute a threat for the individual's identity, but as a continual process of self-discovery and self-understanding, which gives individuals an insight into their own lives and the opportunity to define the meaning of their past in reference to their own identities (cf. Fischer-Rosenthal 2005). The category of biographical work can be applied in the practical field that is body tattooing using the metaphor of the biographical map, which made fairly frequent appearances in my interlocutors' statements: "biographical life maps, road maps" (Karol), "a map of associations" (Maciek), "a biographical-psychological map" (Tomek). Like a geographical or historical map, a biographical one in this context is understood as a symbolic representation of a certain territory – the individual's biography and identity – through which particular images of the "I" and the events that go with them can be manifested and materialised in the form of specific tattoos. It is therefore a subjective representation of one's own life encapsulating crucial points in the individual's history.

By using the map metaphor to look at biographical work we are able to identify two significant moments that often appear during analysis of the narratives I collected: the moment of drawing the map, involving marking specific points on it and charting a certain biographical trajectory with the aid of the tattoos, and that of retrospective reading of the map, i.e. interpretation of one's tattoos from a specific perspective and attempts to link the points on it into a certain "I" image that is the quintessence of biographical work. Of course, the moments of "writing" and "reading" the map are not entirely separate – for one thing, "writing" (i.e. sketching a new biographical perspective) always to some extent assumes "reading" (interpretation of the trajectory that has already been covered). However, these two moments can be divided not only at the analytical level, but also on the time axis – creating a tattoo especially involves "writing" a biography, drawing a new section of a map, whereas

looking at it “years later” is often linked to an attempt to “interpret” the map (in its entirety or in parts) and render it coherent or continual.

“Writing” a biographical map

The first of the moments of biographical work that I distinguished is the act of writing or constructing a biographical map. In this context, tattooing a body can be treated as a process of marking on one’s own map specific crucial biographical moments and turning points in identity that are significant to the individual, so an act of drawing personal “*lieux de mémoire*” on the surface of one’s skin. The concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or “realms of memory”, gained great popularity in contemporary memory studies thanks to the French historian Pierre Nora (1989, 2001, 2002), who used the term to explain the “will to remember” characteristic of modern society, or, to use Kaja Kaźmierska’s (2008: 79) term, the phenomenon of “ennoblement of memory”. According to Nora, in a dynamically changing world, in which the memory communities (*milieux de mémoire*) which once played a key role in transmission and preservation of knowledge, tradition and collective memories are dying out (1989: 7-8, 2001: 37), it has become essential to create “realms of memory” – archives, museums, monuments, libraries, anniversary celebrations and festivals – which then constitute the bastions of memory and designate its framework. The French historian argues that “realms of memory”, symbolic spaces in which “memory crystallises and secretes itself” (Nora 1989: 7), are a support for the collective memory which allow it to be constantly experienced anew, and thus play the role of material foundations for the reconstruction of collective identities.

In this book, I will treat tattoos as individual or personal “*lieux de mémoire*”, rooted not so much in collective experience as in individual experiences, and viewed as an expression of the desire to commemorate and preserve important biographical moments for individuals on the surface of their skin. I shall therefore look at body tattooing as an act of marking individual “*lieux de mémoire*”, a method used to make a “live” record, externalising and representing the events, changes and self-images which the individuals regard as significant and worth preserving at a given moment in their life trajectories. Thanks to their durability and indelibility, tattoos are very good at playing the role of identity symbols, referring individuals to their personal histories. Reading the narratives I collected, there is no doubt that for most of my interlocutors their tattoos were aesthetic carriers of their experiences. Many of my interviewees stated that getting a tattoo had for them been directly linked to a life situation that they had found important, which had often entailed certain changes or meant some kind of turning point. Although they frequently reported that the desire to have a tattoo had appeared much sooner, and sometimes matured in them for a number of years, the “catalyst” was often a specific biographical event which they wanted to memorialise and a change which they wanted to record on the surface of their bodies.

Significantly, many people got a tattoo in circumstances which, at least in the Western European cultural realm, are customarily seen as moments in which an individual’s social status and role change: passing school-leaving exams, moving out from the parental home, beginning university or finding the first job. Deprived of access to collective rites of passage that can be labelled as significant “status passages”, or considering them insufficient, they

tattooed their bodies in the desire to commemorate an event marking a turning point for them: entering adulthood, beginning independent life, leaving home or moving to another town (cf. Atkinson 2003; Langman 2003; Vale and Juno 1989):

As I'm sure you can guess, I got my first tattoo in my first year at university, as soon as I got to Poznań, so as soon as I left home. It was pretty much the first few months after I came here (Natalia).

I only got my first tattoo after my Matura [secondary school leaving exam – Translator's note], because I wanted it to be a great, fully mature decision. Perhaps the Matura doesn't give any guarantee that you're mature, but for me it was a turning point that meant that I could make such a decision entirely consciously (Maciek).

And to be honest, I thought then, "OK, it's a new phase starting". I moved to a certain place and thought I wanted to show a bit of that on myself (Łukasz).

For some of my interviewees, the moment that was a turning point in their lives, which brought with it the need to reformulate their "I" image, was a birthday – either the 18th, the 21st or the 30th, which in our culture often symbolise either entry into adulthood or beginning a new period in one's life:

I had this tattoo done right after my 30th birthday. And my 30th birthday... was a certain turning point for me too. I was really looking forward to it (Zuza).

This is my first tattoo: the crow, the crazy crow. This is the first tattoo I had. I had it done for my 21st birthday. After all the 21st birthday kind of represents a boundary you cross, actually entering adulthood (Alicja).

Many of the interviewees used their tattoos to record events that they regarded as turning points not so much because of social convention, but rather because they shattered the order of their previous lives, reorganised or placed a question mark against their own self-image which they had themselves created. Such occasions were a stay in hospital due to a serious illness (Ewa, Zosia), a change in group of friends (Ewa), or first contact with drugs (Dorota). There were also people for whom tattoos fulfilled the role of "*lieu de mémoire*" of a very significant transformation in identity: changing or becoming aware of their sexual orientation (Ola, Magda, Zuza).

An awful lot changed in terms of emotions, personal life, orientation, finding out and knowing myself. I think in all possible available parts of my contact with the world a great deal of things changed, revealed themselves, you know, were shown. For me it was... I still don't know what to call it, you know? You could say that an entire revolution and turnaround happened in my life, yes [...] And the tattoo was probably the icing on the cake, a kind of complement, a marking perhaps, because it appeared right after I gave a name to various things very loudly and clearly. Maybe it was a reflection of this loud and clear naming. Do you know what I mean? (Magda)

In 2001, so a little while after getting this tattoo done, I met a certain lady who became a catalyst, as it were, for revealing my true sexual orientation: the correct, wonderful and right one. It wasn't an easy time, if only because I had to get everything sorted out in my head, analyse it all, reconcile myself. At first it was quite hard, facing up to the fact that I am a homosexual. [...] And it was a kind of expression of that (Zuza).

For some people, the tattoo was a response to the changes occurring in their emotional lives and relationships: falling in love, getting engaged, meeting a new boyfriend or girlfriend, or the opposite – breaking up with someone important to them:

I cut ties with a girl who I was unhappily in love with, because as fate would have it we even lived together. I met a new girl, and got this tattoo done. Just when I split up with the other one (Mateusz). I'd been in love once in my life then, perhaps that's why (Karolina).
I got the first tattoo done shortly after my divorce. I don't remember exactly how long it had been, but I remember that I'd really wanted to get a tattoo even when I was still with my wretched husband, except that I think he had a really negative attitude towards them. And when I got divorced I had it done right away, or soon after (Magda).

Sometimes, the biographical context for the tattoo was not an identity crisis or key moment in life, but rather an internal need to change or reorganise one's world life, self-image or style in some way. Tattooing the body, then, is at least a small change in appearance which becomes a carrier of this change and a sign – demanded or expected – of a new beginning, renewal, hope, completing a certain stage in life and starting the next one:

[Tattoos] appear before trips, or other ventures that require a major change to the position of the body in a broad sense. In fact it's sometimes like in Iran: for the New Year in Iran you have to buy new things and throw out your old ones, because it's a new beginning.¹ Throw out the old ones because it's a new beginning. It's a little like that, you know, new shoes and new tattoo. A new beginning, or something of the sort (Karol).

I'll tell you what it symbolises for me. Well, yes, absolutely totally, burning traces. Cutting myself off from the past. In a kind of energetic-spiritual-magical dimension, hmm... It's a farewell with the past. And this flame is, I mean was, when it came about, for me a symbol of the arrival of a new one. And the flame as such also symbolises for me a great power. And it brings me calm. Yes, calm, power, cutting off from the old and the arrival of the new. That's all (Zuza).

For some, the process of marking out personal “realms of memory” was also linked with the desire or need to record on their skin personal symbols and important “imperative contents” (to quote the phrase used by one interviewee), precisely in order to remember them. It was their intention not just to mark a significant change in identity and turning point in their biographical trajectory, but to make a private commitment – sealed in a picture permanently inscribed on their own bodies – that they would never forget certain contents important for their own identity:

And later I had the Shiva done on my back, I had a dancing Shiva in a flame tattooed. I really liked this symbol, the symbolism of Shiva at the time. There's something happening, everything's burning, he's dancing, trampling on the dwarfs of ignorance, holding a drum, beating the rhythm of the self and consciousness. And this moved me in a way and I thought it would fit, that this tattoo would always remind me of something: remind me of all these great Buddhist values. And this moved me in a way: trampling on the dwarfs of ignorance, a signal that you have to develop the consciousness, develop yourself. [...] Shiva tramples on the dwarf of ignorance. And I liked that, because I wanted to become someone who was not an ignoramus, who didn't ignore others, but approached them with understanding. In life it doesn't work, but you have to try. And that was what I really liked in this Shiva: an attempt to understand, to approach another suffering person with mercy, to try to help them somehow (Tomek).

¹ The interviewee is referring here to the Iranian New Year, Nowruz, the festival of new beginnings.

I've actually thought about the contents of this shoulder tattoo. I basically wanted it to be a kind of talisman or message for me, for it to contain some kind of imperative contents, just for me: don't get down, chin up. Life's too much of a trifle to take it hard. You need to take it easy, yes (Mateusz).

And I got an Om symbol tattooed, because I thought to myself that it'd be nice when I got out of the hospital... I promised myself that I'd get this tattoo done to remember it. For some time I'd liked the fact that a tattoo can fulfil a kind of function as a reminder, reminding you that in every situation there's a way to be calm, even if faced with extremely serious fears, stresses. There's always a way, and sometimes it can be as completely simple as saying a mantra (Zosia).

For many people, then, tattoos are a kind of aesthetic souvenir, often self-designed, with which they can immortalise a given moment, a specific period, a picture of themselves and the feelings – positive or negative – connected with a given situation. Tattoos played for them the role of personal “*lieux de mémoire*” and the material traces of their experience, transformations and the contents important for them. The traces of memory, preserved and materialised in the form of a tattoo, marked the scope of the individual identities and were used as orientation points for their personal biographies. In the next part of the book, I will look at the use that my interlocutors made from their personal “realms of memory”.

“Reading” a biographical map – continuity and change

Biographical work carried out through tattoos may involve not only pinpointing important biographical moments on a personal map, but also retrospective “reading”, i.e. reviving and interpreting one's own “*lieux de mémoire*”. This type of biographical work assumes above all the need to “recall”, which we can understand after Mieke Bal (1999) as an act of returning in our recollections to our own past and its constructive and transforming interpretation from the perspective of the present. Thinking back to specific biographical contexts and events in this way brings with it the act of narrative appropriation of past events, their creative interpretation, which allows us to include this modified past in the created “here and now” (at least in the interview situation) of our image of our own “I”. And the tattoo can serve as a point of reference and mnemonic aid, and thus a symbolic medium for the memory. It is a symbol recorded on the skin – permanent, material, visual and necessarily always made at some moment in the individual's history. In the next paragraphs I shall focus on the significance which the tattooed “realms of memory” had for the interviewees, and go on to look at how they creatively reconstructed their identity on the basis of the memory maps they made.

For many of the research participants, their tattoos were all linked to specific “microstories” on the particular context in which they were done, the process of the decision to get the tattoo, choosing the pattern and the artist, obstacles and problems which they ran into, the role of other people (favourable or otherwise in realising the tattoo project), and especially the biographical circumstances in which the images were acquired on the skin. These stories, which comprise a large part of the empirical material I collected, were treated as a kind of narrative about those telling them, their past and experiences, which frequently played a decisive role and influenced the dynamic of their involvement in the body-tattooing process, their many life choices and self-image. Their tales often referred not only to the “here and now” (or rather “there and then”) connected with the tattooing process itself, which

they defined quite broadly – from the time when they first had the idea of getting a tattoo to the moment when it was healed – but were also part of a wider story about their lives and experiences. From the point of view of my interviewees themselves, the significance of the tattoos – their relevance and validity – was connected to the fact that (like photographs) they had a very large potential to bring back memories or “revive the past” (Kaźmierska 2008: 79): the way I once was, how things once were, what was going on with me and so on.

When speaking of their tattoo projects – which they had sometimes been working on for a number of years – many individuals emphasised that their tattoos formed a kind of biographical map of their past, “archaeological excavations” (Zosia), composing an intimate “photo album” (Marek, Karol), chronicle (Wojtek) or journal (Tomek), in which the trajectory of their identity, moments of breakdown or rebellion, transforming experience, and existential turning points are recorded. One of my interviewees, who had been having tattoos done for the past five years, spoke of the unrelenting power that they had owing to the importance of the memories that went with them. He compared himself to Johnny Mnemonic, the protagonist of William Gibson’s cyberpunk story (1984) and the film of the same name directed by Robert Longo, whose brain implant allowed him to store and transport a large amount of information. He perceived his tattoo-inscribed body as a kind of memory carrier, a database with information from his own biography allowing quick access to the past and – intellectual or emotional – “processing” of information associated with events, ideology or beliefs or feelings rooted in a given biographical context.

The role of the tattoo as a tool allowing the individual to revive memories was also clearly visible in another section of the interview:

You know what, sometimes I come back to them based on sentiment and identifying specific tattoos with a specific period in my life. For example: I remember that I got a tattoo done because I was in love with this girl, or I remember that not long after getting a tattoo I was at some concert or some party or other. And I remember that I had certain emotions and for example this tattoo was a kind of reward for me for passing my Matura, for getting into university, for storming my exams. Or was a present I gave myself, because something wasn’t working out in my life and I gave myself a nice surprise. [...] You know, these are the contexts that I interpret now, in hindsight. You know, when I got a tattoo I didn’t do so because I’d fallen in love with some girl, but now I can sometimes look at it and remember that when I got this tattoo, I had certain emotions going on in some part of my life. For example I was stressed then because I was revising for an exam, for the Matura, for the university entrance exam, or I’d fallen in love with that girl or whatever. I look at these tattoos and remember what I was doing then, what was going on in my life. The tattoo itself is not linked to these emotions, it just locates them in time. It’s a bit like when for instance you look at a book and think, I remember that when I read that book something or other was going on in my life at that specific point. [...] For me they’re just personal, there are so many memories connected with them. And as I said, I can state: when I got that tattoo this and that were going on in my life. But only I can say that, because I don’t think that anyone else could construct the same kind of map of associations that I have (Maciek).

As this statement shows, biographical work that permits “reading” of one’s own tattoos can entail thinking back nostalgically or sentimentally to certain biographical “contexts”, which allow the emotions that accompany them to be refreshed or experienced anew. The memories revived by specific pictures recorded in the skin by no means have to refer directly to the situation in which the tattoo was acquired itself, but can rather refer on the basis of

associations to other experiences or events important to the individual – passing the Matura, getting into university, falling in love, a concert, or, in the case of other interviewees, a divorce, engagement or trip – which constitute integral elements of the individual's biography. Rather like a photo album on the shelf, they are always “at hand” for the moment when the person feels like going on a sentimental journey into the past and comparing it to the present.

An interesting idea that appeared not only in the interview extract quote above, but in other narratives too, was that of the hermeticity or inaccessibility of this biographical map to other people. Others, as Maciek points out, would not be able to create it or reconstruct it, or even, adds Wojtek, to decipher it without access to any (author's) key or instructions. Speaking about their biographies, the course of which can be designated by many events and experiences which others doubtless shared – representatives of a given generation or people in a similar life situation (e.g. Matura candidates, students, employees of large corporations) – my interviewees stressed the unique and intimate nature of their biographical maps and the sets or series of “*lieux de mémoire*” that formed them. They attempted to underline that their biographical maps were fixed not so much in the collective memory as in biographical memory (Każmierska 2008), rooted deep in their personal experiences. As Bal notes (1999: viii), recollections embedded in individual memory, which she calls “narrative memories”, are characterised by being “affectively coloured, surrounded by an emotional aura that, precisely, makes them memorable”. This “emotional aura” of the individual's memory map is often inaccessible or invisible to people who only observe the visual representation of the memories – the tattoos.

Biographical work involving “reading” of the biographical map – which my interviewee here called a “map of associations” – allows emotions or experiences to be situated in time and referred to each other in the wider biographical context. This means that for my interlocutors their tattoos represented emotional freeze-frames or memory carriers that were in a sense a kind of orientation and reference point for their biographies or identities. By definition, an identity map is not composed of distinct and isolated places or objects, but rather points to the links between them, giving them meaning with regard to the other key points that feature on the map. My interviewees' biographical tattoo maps often seem aesthetically incoherent and dispersed, as the individuals whose bodies provide the canvas for them frequently changed the style and subject of the tattoos or the artist responsible for them. However, an analysis of the collected narratives demonstrates that the various tattoos representing specific crucial moments in life referred to each other in the context of the individual's biography, meaning that they can be ordered – chronologically at least – according to an aesthetic key. One of the most important characteristics of the biographical map is therefore the fact that it can serve the individual as an orientation tool within the biographical space, allowing him or her to reach specific “*lieux de mémoire*” and locate them in relation to the other key points on the map.

It is important to note that, just as the biographical maps plotted on the bodies of individual people vary, the creative interpretations made by the bearers of these tattoos also differ. As I noted earlier, creation of an individual map is not solely about “collecting” past events and looking back to remember facts from the past. It is more about reinterpreting them and making them part of a broader identity project, or, to use Giddens's term, “corrective

intervention into the past” (1991: 72). Below, I shall focus on two separate types of reconstructive interpretation of own maps which I identified during analysis of my empirical material. One way tended towards looking for coherence and continuity of identity, creating a composite map, and the other towards the changes in identity emerging during life, assuming construction of a map of change.

The composite map – marking the permanence of the “I”

For some people, interpreting one’s own biographical map meant above all searching for an expression of permanence in one’s identity in diverse tattoo projects. This was therefore an attempt to find a certain coherence between various involvements and images of oneself, created or developed at various stages of life and in various biographical contexts. This type of biographical work gave individuals the opportunity to refer elements or stages of their own biographies – often materialising in the form of specific “*lieux de mémoire*” – to later situations or current ideas on their “I”, and to find common threads.

The below extract, and several other narratives, contain two important themes that fit my understanding of biographical work directed towards finding the permanence of one’s “I”:

If you were to reconstruct exactly what tattoos I had done in which year, you’d probably be able to reconstruct my character. It’s also linked to some memories, I can recall what was happening then. It’s almost a way to preserve the continuity of our personality: writing on yourself like this is a little like making notes of important things on your hand, except more lasting and forever. It’s a bit like a journal, a diary (Tomek).

My interviewee suggested here that studying the tattooed biographical map that had been forming over many years gave him the chance to reconstruct his personality. As Strauss notes (1959), “the awareness of constancy in identity is [...] in the eye of the beholder rather than ‘in’ the behaviour itself”, and this view brings with it the moment of self-recognition and searching for the bonds that hold the “I” together at various stages in life. This is possible thanks to the creation of a unifying interpretive scheme, meaning putting one’s own tattoos in a framework that allows us to combine diverse expressions and packages of the self into a certain relatively coherent whole. We can therefore regard the creation of a composite map as an active endeavour seeking to maintain the sense of coherence of the individual’s identity and continuity of the biographical narrative. To allude once again to the previous metaphor of the map – just as by joining together all the important points on it we can perceive the whole territory and the roads leading from one end to the other, creative interpretation of each tattoo and the meanings that link them allows us to perceive the continuity of our own identities and to make a reflexive reconstruction of our own character.

Significantly, the interviewees interpreting their biographical maps in this way declared that their biographies were held together not so much by the symbolic content of their tattoos or an attachment to a specific aesthetic style, but rather an indeterminate “essence” of their own “I”, “personality” (Tomek), “what comes from within” (Łukasz). The composite interpretation therefore meant adopting an essentialistic conception of identity, assuming the

existence of a certain permanent and unchanging core of the individual identity – an inalienable “base” (I wrote more on this in Chapter 1).

It's a bit like with fashion: every season you have a new collection, new trends, but it's always worth keeping to some base, so you just have your own style. For example you look at some actress and she always has her style, just a little modified, every season a little different. And it's similar with tattoos: you can get another one done or not, you can remove it or not. But you still have this base: this is you, it creates part of you. It's not like every moment you have something different, something plastered on, you have an earring, you don't any more, now this, next moment that, dreadlocks, then straight and blonde. It's just a bit silly. Everyone has some kind of character, which changes a little over the years, but still the base stays the same, you're always the same person. You can't change everything at the same time. And tattoos are a bit like that (Iza).

Iza's statement demonstrates that in the context of the polyphony and variability of styles, images and available forms of body modification, her tattoos allowed her to put down roots in a concrete, individual style, which was at the same time the unchanging basis of her identity. Seeing tattoos as a certain kind of “base” for the individual “I” also means that minor changes in style of dress or haircut are not experienced as something that threatens the sense of coherence of one's own identity, because it is guaranteed by its permanence. Biographical work directed towards creation of a composite map therefore allows us to maintain a sense of continuity in our many fragmentary and temporary (stylistic or biographical) commitments. In this context, interest in and devotion to tattoos can be treated not so much as an expression of fascination with the transformability of the body, biography and identity (one that is often attributed to individuals in late modernity), but rather, as Drozdowski suggests, as attempts to “emphasise the personal sphere of invariability”, the essence of the “I”, or as proof of being “faithful to choices already made” and the “*lieux de mémoire*” which people designate for themselves (Drozdowski 2006: 165):

Tattoos are a long-term commitment. Perhaps it is this characteristic [...] that contrasts them most strongly with the currently dominant cultural models. Although tattoos today are fairly universally linked with the late-modern imperative of externalisation, publicisation of all possible identifications and with the fascination characteristic of later modernity with transformability (of the body, biography, identity), it seems that in reality the growing interest in tattoos is more an expression of emphasising the personal sphere of invariability. We can therefore say that tattoos are actually profoundly conservative. They are supposed to discipline and mobilise us to be faithful to choices already made. They are meant to present the tattooed person as an individual who desires to be perceived as moulded once and for all (Drozdowski 2006: 165).

The conventional idea of the permanence of a tattoo, which many of my interviewees cited as setting it apart from most other “products” available in the “supermarket of style” (Sweetman 1999: 58), had major significance in maintaining the sense of coherence of identity. Although all the decorative procedures that the body undergoes can be removed or changed to other, more modern and attractive ones, for many people tattoos were a form of identity-related or stylistic commitment, and even a guarantee of continuity of the “I”. The permanence of a tattoo allows individuals to perceive themselves as possessing a coherent identity and biographical narrative. It therefore comes as no surprise that those who concentrated on stressing the continuity of their “I” captured and presented in their

biographical maps seldom considered having their tattoos removed. Some of them were radically against the idea, as the below quotation reveals.

I don't think it'll pass. It's so strongly engraved in my psyche that it just wouldn't be possible to change it. It's so much rooted in me that I don't think there's a force that could knock tattoos out of my head. And I can't even imagine suddenly wanting to get rid of everything. I think I'd just have to get some mental illness not to want to have a tattoo on my arm or my neck. I can't imagine that happening (Wojtek).

This statement is perhaps the most emphatic evidence of the extent to which tattoos may be perceived as an externalisation of the “real I”, a certain essence of identity which does not change over time, and which therefore guarantees continuity and coherence in the individual's biography. For the people adopting this approach, the tattooed “realms of memory” were not only traces of the past or a contribution to the contemplation of it, but something that remained current and referred to their biography as a whole, rather to just isolated snippets of it.

The map of changes – marking changes in identity

Apart from the relatively rare instances in my interviews where the biographical map was interpreted as an expression of coherence and continuity in the individual's identity, much more frequent were narratives of change. The interviewees spoke of their biographical maps, concentrating on the way in which their tattoo projects reflected alterations in their identities. They interpreted each tattoo – a personal “*lieu de mémoire*” – as a symbolic representation of their “I”, which did not coincide with how they now felt about themselves, rather testifying to the transformations that had taken place in their identities. In the stories they told about building their maps of change, my interlocutors frequently strove to answer the question of who they had once been, how they had become what they were today, and what linked or separated these different incarnations of their identities. I will now examine how my interviewees interpreted, negotiated and scrutinised their past in the context of their involvement in tattoos, and what their verdict was today, in hindsight, on the “diaries” recorded on their bodies.

One of the important moments of construction of the map of change came when the individuals sought to understand their own biographical situation and the related motifs leading to an interest in tattoos, and involvement in this practice of body modification. For many interviewees, this interpretive return to their own past meant the need to confront a self-image with which they were no longer able or willing to identify, for example that of the teenage rebel. When speaking of these youthful tattoo projects they were very often critical of themselves, and rather than looking at the similarity between the various versions of the “I” they concentrated on the differences, thus constructing a biographical narrative based on the contrast between past/present and former “I”/current version: better, more mature, more self-aware, wiser. By applying this perspective, they were able to come to terms with this past self-image, but also to refer it to the present image in terms of a contrast, which paradoxically cemented the various forms of the individual's identity. Frequently, this meant taking up an

ironic distance to former “incarnations” of identity, often with a certain sentiment or a touch of affection, as can be seen in the following interview extracts:

For me it started earlier and was connected to fascination with music, with certain rock bands and so-called adolescent rebellion. It was the start of secondary school, so the time when everyone is rebelling. I really wanted to rebel, like everyone else, and on the whole I wanted to be terribly different like everyone else (Ewa).

Back in Kluczbork, at my school, in my class and social circle I was the one who did everything first. The most daring and craziest, and actually just stupid. And someone came up with the tattoo idea, and of course I was going to get one. Dad told me I could have a tattoo done when I was 18. I didn't feel like waiting, Dad wasn't there, so I got it, I didn't care [...] I wonder now whether if I hadn't been this mini-rebel back then, if I'd have ever got a tattoo (Iza).

I do it for myself, whether people like it or not. I like it, I'm happy with it and other people's opinions don't interest me in the slightest. And that's not just for show. Maybe it was when I was, let's say, 15 or 16, when I wanted everyone on the street to look at me. [...] When I was a teenager, I wanted to get tattoos so that people would pay attention to me, to get a couple of coolness points. It was cool, you know, a teenager with tattoos, pretty rare (Bartek).

As Kaźmierska (2008: 42) notes, returning to one's past often results in numerous tensions, provoked for example by the “difficulty in finding the key to coherence of experiences” or the need to face up to problematic experiences that contradict the present image of the “I”. For some of the interviewees, this type of biographical work brought with it just such a confrontation with unpleasant or traumatic past experiences, which they connected directly to their involvement in tattooing. We can take Grzesiek's narrative as an example. Here is a man who has achieved a great deal in his professional life, gaining the recognition of his community, who looks back to his childhood, stressing that what pushed him towards tattoos was a sense of marginalisation and rejection by his peers. A further example is Łukasz, who associates his involvement in a specific aesthetic style with a sense of being lost and an inability to deal with existential problems:

I don't know, maybe it's to do with the fact that I was an unpopular child. I think it was: I was an unpopular child, although I was the same as everyone else. And maybe now I want to mark this individuality of mine somehow, show that there's something better about me for having tattoos, as I know that not everyone can have them. Maybe it results from the past. That was the way I saw it as a child. I felt I was unpopular, more peripheral, treated worse, mostly by the boys – I tended to sit with the girls, I had a group of female friends. In any case I feel that in my childhood I was more pushed aside, rejected, on the edges. That's how I feel. And I think that now in adult life I want to mark my – I don't know – originality in some way. Perhaps I also want to be noticed more... I feel that it had a large influence, my childhood (Grzesiek).

As for the Odin motif itself, I think it was a certain strong authority that I wanted to embody in myself in some way. I found a lot of things in myself that were... I had some small problems with myself and didn't feel too good doing certain things. I'm struggling to find the words to express what I mean. Best coming from the heart, I suppose. You know, I had a bad outlook on the world and people then. And that was linked to the fact that I had bad things to say about people. And I liked a certain group of people who were, I thought, close to me, because they liked a similar type of art, had similar views on the world, and judged others in a similar way. But that's actually bullshit, because I had a certain problem with myself: I perceived people like that and not in another way, because I looked at myself in that way. And I think that the tattoo I choose then reflected that attitude. I don't think that Odin's an entirely negative figure, but in mythology he was associated with brutality. And I think that I had a slightly brutal outlook then, I felt that

I wasn't assimilated with this world, that I had my own world. At the time, you know, I got a bit fanatical sometimes. But afterwards I thought the world is real, that I am here for some reason, I exist here and can do something with what is actually deep inside me, what is in my imagination, in my dreams. And I thought to myself that I should try living with everything around me (Łukasz).

Reading these extracts shows that reflecting on one's own tattoos can become part of a self-therapy process that goes to the root of an individual's problems with identity. The process of retrospective reading of their own tattoos gave my interviewees the chance not only to gain a greater insight into themselves, interpret who they were, and place these self-understandings in the wider context of their lives, but also to make a positive reformulation of their past with reference to their current "I" images. This reformulation was made possible not so much by engaging in polemic with the previous versions of the "I" and making an ironic detachment from them, as in the extracts quoted above, but rather by coming to terms with negative experiences by viewing them as successive biographical stages which allowed the individual to become the person they are today. The passage between one identity and another that the interviewees described – the transformation of the unpopular, lost boy into the adult man who knows his value, or that of the aggressive hate-filled youth into someone reconciled with the world – was not perceived as a radical qualitative change or identity revolution, but as a process taking place gradually over the years with the individuals' conscious participation. They therefore perceived themselves as subjects actively constructing their identity, endeavouring to work on themselves and on various problems, and thus able to attach meaning to the dynamic of their identities. This moment of biographical work brought a result in the form of a not so much essentialistic as constructivist view of identity: prone to reconstruction, processual and fluid.

The process of carrying out biographical work directed at "reading" a map of change also meant for many individuals an act of creative reinterpretation of their personal "*lieux de mémoire*", i.e. the specific tattoos which for them expressed their self-identification and represented a reflection of a biographical context that was once important to them. My interviewees often stepped outside of the "here and now" of their identity, attempting to negotiate or verify the meanings attributed to each of their tattoo-souvenirs, updating, neutralising or invalidating them, or opening them up to new meanings.

Some of my interlocutors emphasised that certain personal "realms of memory", despite with time undergoing a certain biographical decontextualisation and lose their original experiential depth, never lose their value. They do not refer directly to the current struggles faced by the individual in terms of identity and emotional states, but are a stark reminder of important life experiences and contexts, evoking a past that played an influential role in deciding what the given person had become. A retrospective reading of these fundamental signs of change was a crucial aspect of the biographical work: it allowed individuals to answer the question of who they were and how they had changed, recreating a bond with their own past and refreshing it again. As an illustration of such work on one's own biography, we can take the following extract from the interview with Magda, who discusses the meaning which she attributes to the tattoo she had done just after her divorce, 11 years ago:

I'm happy that it will always be there, because I know that it symbolises important moments. Whatever happens afterwards, it symbolises things that'll always be important in my life. You know, various external circumstances will change, other important people and important experiences will appear, but that won't change the fact that this tattoo reflects an important bit of my life. And even if various things pass, it won't change its symbolism or importance. When I think of that first event, it's almost sated itself emotionally and stopped having this dimension of evident depth, but that doesn't change the fact that looking back I still view it as a very important experience in my life, which changed me diametrically. [...] It was a time of very important changes that I never want to forget. I really like it and don't want that to change. It works as a – I don't know – memory, as a symbol, as a reminder of various precious things that I experienced then. I don't want to look at this time as a horrible moment, it was a damned important and valuable experience (Magda).

In many cases, though, the change in my interviewees' life situation and their ideas on themselves led them to feel the need to fairly radically redefine their tattooed "*lieux de mémoire*", and often even to neutralise or invalidate them. When a given tattoo was set very firmly in a specific biographical context – in the experiential "here and now" – any blurring or change to this context often meant that the context of the given tattoo (its message, value or symbolic dimension) was erased, and the sense of continuity between various expressions of identity, between one's own past and present, was severed. For some people, this meant that their personal "realms of memory" became empty or dead in meaning, as they were no longer a space for revision of experience and memories. This is evident in the statements quoted below: in the first, the interviewee refers to the tattoo which she had done just after leaving hospital following a long period of hospitalisation caused by cancer; in the second, the speaker mentions a tattoo directly linked to her now abandoned passion.

Today it doesn't have the same meaning it did then. It doesn't mean anything any more, actually. At the time it bore a certain message: "you can do it, you'll beat it, you can be calm and so on", but that was at that point. I had the tattoo right after all that, so for me it was a vivid reminder of that feeling when I actually turned on that mantra and my thoughts stopped going crazy, the adrenaline sank and my heart started to beat more slowly, and my hands stopped shaking. But at present that's not there and it's not as if for example if I have some awful moment, something bad happens in my life, that I look at the tattoo and think to myself "Ommm" (Zosia).

In fact in my case when I get bored by some stage I stop liking it or it stops having meaning for me (Ewa).

Other interviewees, meanwhile, were aware of the dissonance between the image of themselves preserved in the tattoo and their present "I", or alternatively could not deal with the unpleasant or painful memories that a given tattoo brought back, or simply did not want to remember them, and tried to deny or invalidate their personal "*lieux de mémoire*". Usually, their "forgetting strategy", excluding memories related to specific visual representations of important points in their biographies which they once considered key, was to get "cover-ups" of tattoos with other tattoos or simply ignore them.² The story of Ewa illustrates this phenomenon of forgetting. She chose to cover up her tattoo that brought back memories of her relationship with her husband, which had ended with the marriage breaking down:

² In spite of many attempts, I was not successful in contacting people who had had their tattoos removed by laser.

I admit that with the breakdown of my marriage this tattoo lost its significance for me. Because my husband was the driving force behind it... In fact that was where we started from: my marriage, which happened later, my relationship with my husband, our getting together all started from sitting down over a beer together one time and starting to talk, before we really knew each other. We talked about reconstruction. And after that he took me on a trip and I enjoyed it. I started travelling with him and we began to be a couple. So in fact everything connected for me with this tattoo and reconstruction is closely connected to my husband, and now I don't fancy it any more. The tattoo is a nice souvenir, but if I had the chance to get rid of it and get something else done in its place, I'd certainly give it some thought. To be honest with you, I actually completely ignore this tattoo, sometimes I forget I have it, because it's there. Yes, I somehow completely ignore this tattoo. For me emotionally it's not the most important thing at the moment (Ewa).

When I analysed the collected narratives, I was also able to distinguish one more way of "reading" and creative reinterpretation of personal "*lieux de mémoire*" – free interplay of associations which opens them to new meanings and contents. For some people, the advantage of these biographical landmarks was not so much their potential to trap memories in tattooed freeze-frames as the fact that their significance is flexible and open to interpretation. The symbolic nature of many tattoos and the fact that their roots lie in the past meant that the individuals were able to play with the significances and memories they invoked, continuing to attribute new meanings or deconstruct those which they had once carried:

It's a kind of symbol – it makes you think, this tattoo of mine. I don't quite know what it means, but I can think about it, talk for example. What I like about these tattoos is they're so incomplete that I can interpret them, wonder what I had in mind back then, when I did something like that, and what it means for me now. It can always change into a game in which I observe whether there's been progress or regression, or if I don't even remember what it means (Tomek).

In biographical work involving drawing up a map of change, the individuals worked out a biographical interpretive framework which allowed them to grasp the dynamics of their own identities, their radical transformations and fluid changes, and to give meaning to various versions of the "I" from the present perspective. They usually made such attempts after some time had elapsed – several years, or even a decade or more – and therefore assumed a certain distance from the context in which the decision to get the tattoo had been taken as well as the circumstances of their lives and versions of the "I" behind this decision. This distance forced the individuals to confront their own past, to adopt a clear position with regard to their decisions and the actions that had determined their identity at the time, and to make a creative reinterpretation of the relationship between the past time and today. A particularly important role here was played by the act of "reading" one's own "*lieux de mémoire*". In the above sub-chapter I tried to show that tattoos, as echoes of a certain biographical context, are reinterpreted over the course of the individual's life: their meaning changes along with the context in which the given person interprets and experiences them.

Translated by Ben Koschalka