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The Auschwitz Photographer

Gail Griffin

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The child is shot from three angles. Right profile, so you see how aggressively the head was shaved, the tufts and bald patches. Face front, wide white forehead, dark eyes almost stern. And finally the head turned right, eyes lifted toward the ceiling, the pointed chin, and a plaid scarf tied almost rakishly around the head, as if it were a costumed portrait. A boy, probably; shorn, body lost inside the too-large wide-striped prison suit, it's hard to tell. Number two six nine four seven.

"I must have taken 40 or 50 thousand," he recalls, nearing 90. When he landed there at 22, his past as a photographer's assistant saved him. Not Jewish, just a Pole who tried to flee. You can see in his fleshy, sad face the gentle boy he was. Modest, well brought up. So when the beautiful doctor in his impeccable uniform brought the girls, mostly 15 or 16 but some his own age or older, what could he do as they removed their clothes, faced front, ineffectual hands fluttering, turned sideways, turned around, shoulder blades and hip bones pointing, breasts shrinking? "I tried to address them politely," he says, and maybe they grasped that, "What a polite boy," as they stripped and turned and turned and turned, "A kind boy." Maybe some remembered it, maybe they say it now, to their granddaughters, if they speak at all, if they live, how polite he was. Clean, too—he was kept clean, so as not to offend the SS.

He remembers one man by name, Zylinski, from Gdansk. A red-and-blue tattoo covered his back, Eve handing Adam the apple, the tree arching over them, the coiling serpent. "Gorgeous," he remembers, "really beautiful." A work of art. He saw it three times: once when the man removed his shirt and turned his back; again through the camera's eye, which he could not help adjusting carefully to capture all the detail. And then, maybe a month later, a friend who worked the crematorium said he had something

interesting. A large square of skin, tanned. The tree, the naked woman making her offering to the naked man. "I saw it," says the photographer.

Just ahead of the Soviets they evacuated him to Austria, where the Americans found him, weighing 88 pounds. He returned to Poland, but never took up another camera. In his dreams they crowd against the dark gray backdrop, the girls, hungry, huddling in their innocent skin. ■