

The Thief of Auschwitz

Jon Clinch

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There is nothing forgiving in the landscape of *The Thief of Auschwitz*, yet Jon Clinch renders a portrait that is at once redemptive and enduring. One might wonder what more could be said about one of the most brutal moments in mankind's history. Clinch answers with an evocative story that reminds us that it is because of the impermanence of evil that we are able to sustain ourselves in its midst. Maybe most remarkably, *The Thief of Auschwitz* is also a love story.

Clinch threads two narratives throughout the novel: One about Jacob, Eidel, Max, and Lydia Rosen and their brutal death camp experience in 1942; the other, the present-day reflections of survivor Max, an aged, world-renowned painter living in New York City.

Max has spent his lifetime trying to replicate the painting of a young girl that once hung in the camp commandant's office. Painted by his mother and taken from her when she arrived at Auschwitz, it was of his sister. Of his efforts to resuscitate his lost past, Max says, "Failure to expand your horizons is a terrible thing, in an artist or in anybody. It's the closest thing there is to death, I think. It might even be worse than death. It's death in life."

There are numerous "thieves" in *The Thief of Auschwitz*, from prisoners bartering for food to SS officers and Nazi guards who steal from the dead. Even Max's father "thieves" a job in order to save Eidel's life, or, at least, postpone her death.

Apart from the two intertwining narratives, the novel is divided into two sections: Book One: Shadow and Light, and Book Two: Testament. In Testament, almost everyone else has lost hope, but young Gretel finds it. She's been scavenging scraps of paper and writes about what's happening at Auschwitz and then hides the "stories" in empty bottles. "The bottle is everything she knows of hope. She marks time not from the date of her birth or from the date of her arrival at the camp, but from that transformational morning" when she found the stub of a pencil. Then "she lays the bottle into its grave like a baby, and covers it up with mud. Her testament, commended to the earth."

Throughout this timeless masterpiece, the author deftly applies brushstrokes of ineffable tenderness and circumspection—a testament, in its own right, to Jon Clinch's mastery of the writing craft.

CHRIS HENNING (Spring 2013)

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