The Man Who Volunteered for Auschwitz

By David de Sola

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Why a member of the Polish underground sent himself into the infamous prison camp

David De Sola

"The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones."
- Julius Caesar; Act 3, Scene II

WARSAW -- There are very few places that can accurately be described as hell on Earth. One of these is the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II, where as many as 1.5 million people died during the five years the camp was in operation.

The Polish resistance had been hearing horrific first- or second-hand accounts about the conditions inside Auschwitz. These early accounts came primarily from released prisoners, but also from casual observers like railway employees and residents of the nearby village of Oswiecim. The resistance decided they needed someone on the inside.

It is into this environment that Witold Pilecki, a 39-year old veteran of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1921 who fought against the initial Nazi invasion and a member of the Polish resistance, volunteered

himself in 1940. Pilecki's mission was to allow himself to be arrested and, once inside Auschwitz, to collect intelligence for the Polish resistance in the country and the government-in-exile in London, and to organize a resistance from inside the camp.

"I think he knew, he realized what he was getting himself into," said Jacek Pawlowicz, a historian at Poland's Institute of National Remembrance. "But even so, he was not prepared for the things he was actually able to witness."

During the next three years, Pilecki was involved in one of the most dangerous intelligence-gathering and resistance operations of the war. He authored three reports about life inside the camp for the Polish resistance. During his incarceration, Pilecki witnessed from the inside Auschwitz's transformation from a detention facility for political prisoners and Soviet soldiers into one of the Nazis' deadliest killing machines.

An English translation of Pilecki's third and most comprehensive report -- a primary source for this article -- was recently published as a book titled *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*. It is a fascinating first-hand account of virtually all aspects of life inside the camp. The original document is in the custody of the Polish Underground Movement Study Trust in London.

"He was there in all of Auschwitz's worst periods, because he arrived at the moment when the camp was being created and was there until [1943]," Pawlowicz explained. "So while there he saw the camp growing, he saw [Birkenau] being built -- where the ovens were. But the ovens were not only in [Birkenau], there were gas chambers and crematoria on the territory of Auschwitz I."

Pilecki's family was kept out of the loop regarding his activities for security reasons. His son Andrzej Pilecki recalls, "There was secrecy because of the danger, so that the children would know as little as possible. But I felt something. My father was in Warsaw. We were 100 kilometers away. We came to visit him sometimes and my father would teach us how to behave during the occupation."

Pilecki began preparations for his mission in the late summer of 1940. While staying at a safehouse, he found identity papers belonging to a man named Tomasz Serafinski, who was erroneously presumed killed in September of 1939. Because the Nazis asked for the names and addresses of inmates and their relatives as a method to keep the population under control, Pilecki wisely decided not to give his real name or those of his immediate family. Pilecki placed his photograph on Serafinski's papers and memorized his details. His plan was to be arrested and booked under the Serafinski alias.

In the early morning hours of September 19, Nazis did a roundup in Warsaw and arrested as many as 2,000 people. According to Adam Cyra and Wieslaw Wysocki's 1997 biography *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki*, Pilecki was in the apartment of Eleonora Ostrowska the morning of the roundup. A caretaker and member of the resistance came in and made several suggestions to Pilecki for how to avoid being caught. According to Ostrowska, "Witold rejected those opportunities and didn't even try to hide in my flat." When a German soldier knocked on the door and asked who lived there, Pilecki walked out. As he was saying goodbye to Ostrowska, he quietly whispered to her, "Report that I have fulfilled the order."

Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, who later became Foreign Minister of Poland, was arrested in the same roundup and taken to Auschwitz in the same transport as Pilecki, which left the morning of September 21 and arrived at the prison camp at 10 p.m. that same day.

"At the time we were not aware of what Auschwitz was," he wrote. "The underground movement was compelled to investigate what was happening to those people, to check the possibilities of organizing them somehow, possibly of helping them. And Witold Pilecki embarked on that tremendous task. It was his aware and voluntary decision to join another huge round up in Warsaw."

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Pilecki was not happy with the behavior he saw of his fellow Poles. "What really annoyed me the most was the passivity of this group of Poles," he later wrote. "All those picked up were already showing signs of crowd psychology, the result being that our whole crowd behaved like a herd of passive sheep."

"A simple thought kept nagging me: stir up everyone and get this mass of people moving."

Pilecki was booked under the Serafinski alias, and was assigned the prisoner number 4859. Once inside, Pilecki immediately began work on organizing a network among the inmate population. In his own words, his objective was to set up a military organization on the inside to keep up morale, provide news from the outside world, distribute food and clothing to members, smuggle camp intelligence to the outside world, and to prepare detachments to take control of the camp by force if the order were given.

He called his network the Union of Military Organization, known by its Polish acronym ZOW, and would be part of the Home Army, the Polish resistance. The secrecy of the ZOW's existence was paramount. To ensure its continuity in the event of discovery by Nazi guards or informants, Pilecki created a highly compartmentalized system of five-man cells. The leader of each cell would be people of utmost confidence, committed to the Polish resistance and able to withstand possible interrogation or investigation by the German guards. Each cell leader swore an oath to Pilecki himself and only knew of the four men under his command, but not of the existence of any other cells. By doing so, Pilecki effectively minimized the risk of exposure to the entire network.

Pawlowicz estimates that Pilecki's network included some 500 inmates at Auschwitz by March of 1942, but notes this number may have doubled by the time of Pilecki's escape the following year. In time, Pilecki was able to place informants and allies in key positions throughout the camp. In time, these would prove crucial for Pilecki and other ZOW members.

Life inside Auschwitz tested every inmate. How each of them reacted was entirely subjective. Pilecki wrote, "Camp was a proving ground of character."

"Some -- slithered into a moral swamp."

"Others -- chiseled themselves a character of finest crystal."

According to Pawlowicz, Pilecki would write his reports by hand and then have them smuggled out of the camp to the Polish government-in-exile in London. It would usually take about four months for one of his reports to get from Poland to London, typically smuggled by couriers leaving Gdansk heading for Stockholm using forged German documents. The Polish underground used the Stockholm route because Germans were allowed to travel there without special papers.

By early 1943, Pilecki began considering his escape from the camp. He had gone in and accomplished his objective of organizing a resistance within the camp, at which point he thought the logical thing to do was wait for an attack on the camp by the Polish resistance from the outside so they could rise up from within. On top of this, the Gestapo was clamping down on security in the camp and many of Pilecki's recruits had been lost.

Pilecki ultimately made the decision to escape on April 13, 1943. The reason behind this was so he could make the argument for an armed assault on Auschwitz in person to the resistance leadership. He began handing over his network contacts and responsibilities to top deputies as a gradual transition process.

After approximately 2,500 roll calls and 947 days inside the camp by his own calculations, Witold Pilecki and two other inmates escaped Auschwitz. On the night of Monday, April 26 -- the day after Easter Sunday -- the three men were assigned to work in the bakery, which was located outside the camp grounds. They took advantage of a moment when the SS guard wasn't paying attention to cut a telephone wire, force open a door and made a run for it.

Pilecki eventually made his way back to Warsaw and reported to the Home Army's headquarters on August 25, 1943 hoping to find a receptive audience for the ZOW's idea of taking control of Auschwitz from the inside. Unfortunately for him, his former commanding officer, who had known the purpose of his Auschwitz mission, had been arrested two months earlier and the new leadership was not receptive to his proposal. According to Cyra and Wysocki's biography of Pilecki, he felt "bitter and disappointed."

Pilecki's use of the Tomasz Serafinski alias had unintended consequences for the real Serafinski. The Gestapo arrested Serafinski on Christmas Day of 1943 on charges of escaping from Auschwitz. He was held in a local prison in Bochnia for three days before being handed over to the Gestapo in Krakow. After undergoing what Cyra and Wisocki describe as a "brutal investigation" in which he consistently rejected the accusations against him, Serafinski was released on January 14, 1944. According to Jacek Pawlowicz, Pilecki and Serafinski later became friends, adding "That friendship is alive to this day, because Andrzej Pilecki visits their family and is very welcome there."

When the Warsaw Uprising began on August 1, 1944, Pilecki was in the thick of it. According to Norman Davies' authoritative book *Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw*, Pilecki's company focused on a key building on Jerusalem Avenue that overlooked traffic on a crucial east-west thoroughfare. The street is near the present-day location of the Warsaw Uprising Museum.

"Almost every day during the first two weeks of the month, he [Pilecki] captured, lost, and recaptured this building," Davies wrote. "Repeatedly driven out, he repeatedly returned and with deadly cunning repeatedly expelled the German defenders. He lived to fight elsewhere. But so long as he threatened this one vital pressure point, the German command was constantly made to feel insecure." The area came to be known as "Pilecki's Redoubt."

After the defeat of the Warsaw Uprising, Pilecki surrendered to German authorities on October 5 and was taken as a prisoner-of-war to Marnau, Germany, where he was liberated by the U.S. Army on April 28, 1945. After liberation, he remained at the camp for two months before joining the II Polish Corps in Italy under the leadership of General Wladyslaw Anders. Pilecki was assigned to Section II -- an intelligence unit. It was during this period in Italy in the summer of 1945 that he began writing his third and most definitive report about his time in Auschwitz.

Pilecki and two others left Italy in late October of 1945, eventually arriving in Warsaw on December 8. According to Pawlowicz, Pilecki established a cover as a supply manager on a construction site. His real job was to carry out intelligence operations for the II Corps still in Italy, which would pass his information on to the Polish government-in-exile in London.

Pilecki recruited several of his old contacts from Auschwitz and the Polish resistance worked in various post-war institutions. According to Pawlowicz, Pilecki's successful operations in this period included obtaining the phone numbers of government officials and Soviet advisors, documents showing the

falsification of the results of the People's Referendum of 1946 by the communists, and a secret bilateral trade agreement between Poland and Russia calling for the Red Army to be stationed on Polish territory.

Andrzej Pilecki was 13 or 14 the last time he saw his father in the spring of 1947. At the time, he was living with his mother, sister and two cousins in the town of Ostrow Mazowiecka. At the time, his father was on a mission to convince anti-communist youth resistance living in hiding in the Red Forest by Bialystok to demobilize. "He was to pull out the youth who was in the forest, to let them know that there won't be a Third World War, so why should they stay in the forest?" Pilecki says of his father's assignment. "It was a difficult mission. Why? Because he could have been found out and killed on the spot or exiled to Siberia. And he couldn't reveal himself as an officer for that reason, and the youth would only listen to officers."

Of the final meeting with the family, he says, "We lived on the road to Warsaw, and he came to us. He was very sad. He played the piano to himself. And he revealed who he was to my friends. He came to us -- I was with my friends -- and he showed us how to play various games," Pilecki recalls. "He was very happy that my sister and I had so many friends, that we weren't loners -- because we had moved from the east and it was different in Mazowsze. He was very happy that we were connected with others and liked by our peers."

"He didn't know he was leaving us forever. But in letters, he would write that we should live worthwhile lives, to respect others and nature. He wrote to my sister to watch out for every little ladybug, to not step on it but place it instead on a leaf because everything has been created for a reason. ‘Love nature.’ He instructed us like this in his letters."

Pilecki was arrested by communist authorities not long after, on May 5, 1947. According to Pawlowicz, "His fingernails were ripped off, ribs broken, nose broken. His interrogation was very difficult and he was tortured badly." He, and others, were given a show trial for activities against the state the following March. On March 15, he was found guilty on several charges. The court declared, "As a paid agent of General Anders' Intelligence Service, he organized a spy network on Polish territory, collecting information and sending it abroad,' and in doing so 'betraying state secrets.' Pilecki was sentenced to death. A typical capital punishment sentence was carried out within 95 to 105 days of the sentence. The order for Pilecki's execution was given on May 22, two months after his trial.

The final account of anyone seeing Pilecki alive comes from father Jan Stepien, a Home Army chaplain whose own capital punishment was later changed to a 15-year prison sentence. His description of Pilecki as he was being led to his execution at the Mokotow prison in Warsaw: "He had his mouth tied with a white bandage. Two guards led him by his arms. He could hardly touch the ground with his feet. I don't know if he was conscious then. He seemed completely faint."

The exact location of where Pilecki was buried is unknown. His remains are believed to be either in a meadow next to the Sluzewiec cemetery, or in an area of the Powazki Military Cemetery in Warsaw, also called the meadow, in a mass grave with others who were executed by the post-war communist regime.

Today, there is a tombstone with what had been an empty grave for Pilecki in this cemetery. Pilecki's widow Maria, who died in 2002, is now buried there. Flowers, candles and a small Polish flag with the anchor symbolizing the Polish resistance now decorate the gravesite. On the site of the meadow, a brick monument has been built, with small bronze plaques bearing the names of each of the people believed to be buried there, including Pilecki's. Flowers, candles, and Polish flags decorate the site.

Pilecki's family wasn't notified of his execution at the time. They even went so far as to doubt whether it had happened. "When it came to his sentence, we didn't believe that it had been carried out," his son Andrzej recalled. "We weren't notified, there was no body. We hoped -- especially my mother -- that he

would be useful [to the communists], because he knew so much about different organizations, was so active. We deluded ourselves that maybe he's alive somewhere, in Lubyanka [Prison] or in Siberia."

Two years after Pilecki's execution, his son was approached by a former Mokotow prison guard. "I was in prison with your father. I want to help you because your father was a saint," he told Andrzej Pilecki. "I had different tasks, including bringing food to your father. Sometimes he wouldn't touch the food, I wasn't sure if he was praying or thinking. So I would take the food away. Under his influence, I changed my life. I do not harm anyone anymore."

But the years after Pilecki's death were difficult on his family. His widow, a teacher, was unemployed for a year and repeatedly had her job applications rejected. Both of his children found their high school and college ambitions limited because of their father's history. They didn't know about their father's activities during the war at the time, only gradually hearing or reading about it over the years. The family owned property in what is now Belarus, which was taken from them and they were never compensated for it.

There were unsuccessful attempts to rehabilitate Pilecki's memory through official channels in 1957 and again in 1974. In 1989, the Board of the Association for the Care of Auschwitz posthumously awarded Pilecki Order of the Auschwitz Cross, and pushed the Polish Minister of Justice to have Pilecki's name cleared. On October 1, 1990, a court sentence exonerated Pilecki and the others condemned with him during the 1948 trial. In the two decades since, Pilecki has been honored the recipient of numerous posthumous honors, with schools and streets named after him in Poland. A bust of Pilecki is included at Jordan Park in Krakow alongside busts of other distinguished Poles like John Paul II and Marie Curie. Nearly six decades after his death, Polish president Lech Kaczynski awarded Pilecki the Medal of the White Eagle, Poland's highest honor.

During the summer of 2012, Polish archaeologists exhumed the remains of nearly 100 skeletons in the mass grave at Powazki Military Cemetery. The hope is that the remains of Pilecki and others can be identified using genetic testing with DNA provided by their descendants. The process is expected to take several months, but even then this might only be the beginning of the process. According to the AP, the mass grave in Powazki is believed to contain the remains of as many as 400 people.

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In his introduction to the English translation of Pilecki's report, Norman Davies wrote, "Pilecki's name mirrors the tragic fate of millions whom the West forgot. Only when one grasps the true horror of his fate can one comprehend what the Second World War in Europe was really about."

After several decades of silence and ostracism regarding his father, Andrzej Pilecki is grateful for the posthumous recognition he has been receiving during the past twenty years. "There was a ban of speaking about my father," he said. "There's a rebirth now. Those were terrible times, but more and more people are talking about it, and I don't have a moment's peace at home because there are constantly phone calls and the like. That makes me happy."