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## Witold Pilecki: 'Beyond bravery' during World War II

By Rob Eshman

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Have you heard of Witold Pilecki?

A new book, "The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery" (Aquila Polonica: 2012), documents, in his own words, Pilecki's remarkable exploits, and I can't think of a better gift to give yourself for Chanukah.

Pilecki was a Polish army captain who volunteered at age 39 for one of the singular missions of World War II: to get into Auschwitz.

Yes, *into*.

On Sept. 19, 1940, Pilecki left the hideout of the underground Polish Home Army, which he helped create, to deliberately enter a German roundup. He was taken to Auschwitz, where he survived vicious beatings, starvation and pneumonia, and, at the same time, set about organizing resistance units, boosting morale and documenting the murder taking place there.



Beginning in 1941, Pilecki used couriers to smuggle out detailed reports of Auschwitz atrocities, reports that reached the Polish resistance and the British government in London. In 1942, he helped organize a secret radio station, using scrap parts, that regularly broadcast the numbers of arrivals and deaths at the camp.

Courage, they say, is not the absence of fear, but the ability to overcome it. Pilecki was a devout Catholic and patriotic Pole. He was married with two children when he volunteered for Auschwitz.

"The game that I was now playing at Auschwitz was dangerous," Pilecki wrote in his report. "This sentence does not really convey the reality; in fact, I had gone far beyond what people in the real world would consider dangerous."

Pilecki's detailed reports of what was happening inside Auschwitz revealed the treachery of the "final solution" to a world that believed the camp only held Polish and Soviet prisoners of war.

Perhaps because he wrote in factual, unemotional language, perhaps because he wasn't a Jew, his observations continue to carry an irrefutable weight.

"They have told me: 'The more you stick to the bare facts without any kind of commentary, the more valuable it will all be,' " he wrote, speaking of his commanders. "Well, here I go ... but we were not made of wood, let alone stone, though it seems sometimes even a stone would have broken out into a sweat."

Trained as an army captain, he quickly realized that only people with trades had a chance at survival here.

" 'Stupid f\_\_\_\_\_ intellectual,' was the most insulting epithet in the camp," he recounted.

Pilecki posed as a carpenter, and stayed alive by suckling from horses and eating their bug-infested bran. Despite the extreme hardship, he stayed true to his task of documenting the suffering around him.

Here is Pilecki describing how SS officer Josef Klehr murdered inmates with phenol, the first such record:

"At first the injection was made intravenously, but the victim lived too long — several minutes — so in order to save time the system was changed and the injection was made straight into the heart and the inmate lived much less — a few seconds. The still-twitching body was pushed into the toilet behind a wall and the next number entered."

In the spring of 1943, frustrated with the Home Army and the Allies' decision not to attack Auschwitz, Pilecki decided to escape so he could convince the Home Army commanders in person.

"Captain 159 [a fellow inmate] looked at me in some surprise and said, '... can one pick and choose when one want to come to Auschwitz and when one wants to leave?' I replied: 'One can.' "

Indeed, Pilecki joined a bakery detail, overwhelmed a guard and made good his escape.

Once free, Pilecki finished two more complete and detailed versions of his report. In them, he estimated that around 2 million souls were killed at Auschwitz. When the reports reached London, intelligence officials dismissed these numbers as an impossible exaggeration. They weren't.

Pilecki went on to fight in the Warsaw Uprising, then immediately after the war began working against Soviet domination. Despite repeated warnings that Polish authorities, now in league with the Soviets, were closing in on him, he refused to abandon his country and escape.

Polish communists captured Pilecki, accused him of collaboration with the West and sentenced him to death in a show trial. Pilecki told a friend that torture at the hands of the Soviet-trained Poles made Auschwitz look like "child's play." On May 25, 1948, Pilecki was executed in Mokotow Prison, his body dumped in an unmarked grave. He was 47.

Pilecki was posthumously exonerated only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when he was elevated to the stature of Polish national hero and deemed a Righteous Gentile. "The Auschwitz

Volunteer,” which also includes useful and moving essays by Pilecki scholars and admirers, is the first published translation of his report.

Great good, like great evil, is mysterious. Pilecki’s Catholic background was the same as that of countless collaborators. Indeed, many of his torturers in the Soviet-era Polish security services were Jewish. His life complicates the all-Poles-were-bad narrative.

But this much I know about Witold Pilecki: Once he set his mind to the good, he never wavered, never stopped. He crossed the great human divide that separates knowing the right thing from doing the right thing.

“There is always a difference between saying you will do something and actually doing it,” he wrote in his report. “A long time before, many years before, I had worked on myself in order to be able to fuse the two.”

On this holiday that celebrates courage, let us all work to follow his example, and celebrate Witold Pilecki, too. Happy Chanukah.

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