

The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery

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Captain Witold Pilecki

Translated by Jarek Garlinski

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We have been reviewing Holocaust literature for the Jewish News for 29 years; survivor memoirs, scholarly works, books by children of survivors have been standard fare in this publication. But this book, *The Auschwitz Volunteer*, a selection of the History Book Club, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the Military Book Club is truly unique, at once a transcendent example of heroism and a historical document of singular importance.

In September 1940, Witold Pilecki (pronounced veetold peeletsky), a 39-year-old Catholic Polish cavalry officer voluntarily walked into a German roundup of 1,800 Poles in Warsaw and was shipped by train to a new German concentration camp, the soon to be infamous Auschwitz. It was initially set up as a camp for Polish political prisoners, many of whom were savagely killed or worked to death. Barely surviving serious illness in a hospital overrun by lice, Pilecki, having set up a military organization in the camp endured three winters during which he built a radio transmitter to broadcast reports. These clandestine broadcasts, many sent out with escaping Poles were received by the Allies as early as 1941 and reported on the horrors of daily life, the building of the gas chambers and the mass extermination of Jewish prisoners. Pilecki survived starvation and disease, avoided shipment to other camps and escaped in 1943 to join the underground Home Army High Command.

Pilecki fought in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 and once again became a prisoner, ending the war in a German POW camp. Late in 1945, the intrepid Pilecki left his wife and two children and returned undercover to Poland to work with anti-communist resistance organizations. Captured, he was tortured and executed in 1948, not to be exonerated posthumously in the 1990's.

His comprehensive report, completed in 1945, was suppressed by the postwar Polish Communists regime for nearly 50 years. Some might say that the accurate detailing of the day by day atrocities and minutia of camp operations is more than one needs to know.

Yet for the first time it is made clear (to me) that Auschwitz was more than one camp; it was variously a prisoner of war camp, a work camp, a torture and experimentation camp, and a death camp. Even as a death camp, the means of execution varied from clubbing, hanging, and

freezing, to lethal injection, shooting, and gassing. When there weren't a sufficient number of victims to fill a gas chamber, justifying the expenditure of a can of Zyklon B gas, the prisoners were clubbed and sent alive but unconscious into the ovens. None of these details are overlooked.

In preparation for what would be mass shipments of Jews to be immediately murdered, the Germans took some earlier Jewish arrivals, fed them well, gave them good jobs along with their families and had them write letters describing how well they were being treated. Of course they were immediately executed after that.

Hard as he might try to maintain an objective professional tone, Pilecki allows himself to wonder from time to time, "are we people or are we just animals, or worse than animals." The passage of the seasons and the blooming of flowers in the spring make it easy for him to wish he were somewhere else. His devotion to duty, however, in the face of almost 1,000 days in Auschwitz, is 'beyond bravery,' and the story of his escape is the stuff of motion picture drama.

When he finally, in 1945, sat down to write the full report of his three years at Auschwitz his friends told him, "the more you stick to the bare facts without any kind of commentary, the more valuable it will be." "...but we are not made of wood, let alone stone," Pilecki concluded, "though it sometimes seems as if even a stone would have broken out in a sweat."

Many years ago, the old JCC with Federation support sponsored a Holocaust exhibit featuring artifacts provided by the Polish government. The Communist Polish government was anxious to call the exhibit "Crimes against Humanity," anxious that we understand that not only Jews perished in the fires. We were rather unsympathetic to that approach and for good reason. Nevertheless, The Auschwitz Volunteer casts a slightly different light on the infamous camp and its operations. Not "beach" reading by any means, this record of Auschwitz prisoner No. 4859 is certain to become a standard reference work in every major Holocaust library collection.

—Hal Sacks has reviewed books for Jewish News for more than 28 years.

<http://www.jewishnewsva.org/the-auschwitz-volunteer-beyond-bravery/>