The New York Times Book Review

Witold Pilecki with his nephew, not long before volunteering to enter Auschwitz as a prisoner in 1940.

'Were We All People?'

The long-suppressed account of life in Auschwitz by a Polish officer.

BY TIMOTHY SNYDER

ONE man volunteered for Auschwitz, and now we have his story. In September 1940 the 39-year-old Polish cavalry officer Witold Pilecki deliberately walked into a German roundup in Warsaw, and was sent by train to the new German camp. His astounding choice was made within, and for, Poland's anti-Nazi underground.

Poland had been destroyed a year earlier by its two powerful neighbors: eastern Poland had been annexed by the Soviet Union; the western half, including Warsaw, was taken by Nazi Germany. The Soviets overwhelmed Polish attempts at resistance in their zone, but under the Germans, officers like Pilecki managed to establish confidential networks that would come to be known as the Underground State and the Home Army. Auschwitz was set up to render Polish opposition to German rule impossible, and the first transport from Warsaw, in August 1940, had included two of Pilecki's comrades. He went to Auschwitz to discover what had become of them, and what the camp meant for Poland and the world. This he learned and conveyed.

Pilecki's report on Auschwitz, unpublishable for decades in Communist Poland and now translated into English under the title "The Auschwitz Volunteer," is a historical document of the greatest importance. Pilecki was able to smuggle out several brief reports from Auschwitz in 1940, 1941 and 1942, and wrote two shorter reports after his escape in 1943. The long report that constitutes this book dates from 1945 and summarizes what he noted along the way: the brutality of Auschwitz as a German concentration camp for Poles in 1940 and 1941, and its transformation into something worse over the course of the war.

In the beginning, Poles in the camp were killed in public, in improvised and quite brutal ways; in time, deliberate exposure to the elements, concealed shootings and phenol injections became the rule. By the end of the war, Poles would be the third-largest victim group at Auschwitz, after Hungarian Jews and Polish Jews. But during Pilecki's first year they were most of the prisoners and most of the victims.

'Can I write that someone was "much-missed"?' Pilecki says of a dead friend. 'I missed them all.'

So long as the Nazis and the Soviets were allies, between 1939 and 1941, the Poles were at the center of the conflict, at risk from both sides. Even as Pilecki's Warsaw comrades disappeared into the German camps, other Polish officers disappeared into the gulag. But when Hitler betrayed Stalin and the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the German hierarchy of enmity changed. For the next six months or so, Soviet prisoners of war were the major victims of German atrocity. Most of the three million or so murdered Soviet prisoners died of starvation under horrible conditions, but many thousands were sent to German camps and shot — or gassed. At Auschwitz, Soviet prisoners of war were the victims of the first gassing by Zyklon B, later used on the Jews. "The men had been so tightly packed," Pilecki writes, "that even in death they could not fall over."

As the Soviet Union fought on despite German expectations, and as Moscow was supported by Great Britain and the United States in what became a world war, the complexion of enmity changed again. In 1941 the Germans, with local help, had already killed about a million Jews in the occupied Soviet Union, usually by shooting. In 1942, this Holocaust spread to occupied Poland, where most Jews were already enclosed in ghettos. Soviet prisoners of war, rather than being killed, were recruited by the German military and occupation authorities. Most notoriously, Soviet P.O.W.s were recruited from the starvation camps to serve as guards in the new death facilities for Jews that began to operate in early 1942.

Hitler had always claimed that Jews were the cause of all German woe and the basis of both Soviet Communism and British-American finance capital-

THE AUSCHWITZ VOLUNTEER
Beyond Bravery.
By Witold Pilecki.
Translated by Jarek Garlinski.
Illustrated. 401 pp. Aquila Polonica. $42.95.

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ism; his stalled Eastern offensive, which failed to destroy Stalin or win the war, brought the East European lands where most Jews lived under German control. The German death pits in the occupied Soviet Union and the German gas chambers of Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor in occupied Poland served only to murder Jews. Auschwitz, as Pilecki observed and chronicled, was an unusually cruel concentration camp that became, in addition, a death facility.

Pilecki had no difficulty seeing that the persecution of Poles, horrible though it was, was an event of a different order from the German policy of exterminating Jews from throughout Europe. He describes his own entrance to Auschwitz in 1940, when it was a camp for Poles, as the moment when he "bade farewell to everything I had hitherto known on this earth and entered something seemingly no longer of it." The mass gassing of Jews, which began in 1942, provokes reflections of a still more radical kind.

At the time, Pilecki was fortunate enough to be on a work assignment beyond the gates of the camp. He writes of the murdered Jews: "Over a thousand a day from the new transports were gassed. The corpses were burnt in the new crematoria." And then of prisoners like himself: "When marching along the gray road towards the tannery in a column raising clouds of dust, one saw the beautiful red light of the dawn shining on the white flowers in the orchards and on the trees by the roadside, or on the return journey we would encounter young couples out walking, breathing in the beauty of springtime, or women peacefully pushing their children in prams — then the thought uncomfortably bouncing around one's brain would arise . . . swirling around, stubbornly seeking some solution to the insoluble question: Were we all . . . people?"

Pilecki was a sympathetic though precise observer of the fate of others; his report, skillfully translated, stands somewhere between the precious few diaries we have of camp inmates (one by the Dutch Jew David Koker has just been published as "At the Edge of the Abyss") and the great works of memory and literature by Primo Levi and Tadeusz Borowski. But Pilecki's own sustaining obsession was Polish nationhood. He insists on understanding Auschwitz as a trial of the Polish nation, where "a man was seen and valued for what he really was."

Pilecki's definition of Polish identity was one of honor and dishonor. There is nothing of the ethnic nationalism that flourished in his own homeland in the 1930s nor of the zoological nationalism of the Germans who occupied that homeland. The coherence of his report lies in his concern for his comrades in the camp. "To be honest, can I write that someone was 'much missed'?" he says of one dead friend. "I missed them all."

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PILECKI FAMILY

Implicit in the story of Pilecki's own survival are two others: the slow replacement of German prisoners by Poles in the lower administration of the camp, and the successful conspiracy of Pilecki's group. In a way, these are the same story, since among the tasks of Pilecki's comrades was to look after one another's food allotments and work assignments. Their ultimate goal was to organize an uprising to coincide with an Allied bombing or a Polish Home Army raid, neither of which came. When Pilecki finally escaped, in April 1943, the plan involved getting a work assignment in the bakery. It worked, although Pilecki took a bullet along the way.

The two major sources of anti-Nazi resistance in wartime Europe were Communism and Polish patriotism, which were themselves inimical. Pilecki, the Polish patriot, must have known of the solidarity of Communists in Auschwitz, but he never writes about it. For him Communism was a threat and a mistake. His homeland, after all, had been invaded by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union simultaneously. His friends were in German and Soviet camps, and killed by both German and Soviet executioners. By the time he rejoined the Polish anti-Nazi underground in late 1943, the problem was how to fight the German occupation even as Soviet occupation again threatened.

In August 1944 Pilecki participated in the Warsaw Uprising, meant to free the Polish capital from German power before the Red Army arrived. He was one of its heroes, holding the city's major east-west thoroughfare, Jerusalem Alley, and then an important position near the railway station. Meanwhile the Soviets halted outside Warsaw, allowing the Germans to kill more than 100,000 Poles, most of them civilians, many of them people who would have resisted Soviet rule as they resisted German rule. After the uprising was crushed and Warsaw destroyed, Pilecki was detained in a German P.O.W. camp.

Volunteering for Auschwitz and remaining there for almost three years was the most courageous thing Pilecki ever did, perhaps one of the most courageous things anyone has ever done. But it was not his only deed of bravery, and not the one that killed him. At war's end in 1945, Pilecki made for Italy, to report to the command of a Polish Army that had helped the Americans and the British defeat the Germans. He then accepted what would turn out to be his final mission.

The Soviet re-entrance into Poland brought with it the progressive installation of a Communist regime. Pilecki returned to his homeland in October 1945 to report on the takeover, but in 1947 the Polish Communist secret police arrested him. He was given a show trial and executed as an imperialist spy in 1948. His Auschwitz heroism counted for nothing with the Communists, who prosecuted a number of heroic individuals who had reported on the Holocaust or tried to aid its victims. Though Pilecki had been tortured before his trial, he maintained his dignity in court; his defense was that he was doing his duty.

"The Auschwitz Volunteer," the document we are now so fortunate to have, was composed in haste in Italy, just before his return to Poland, because he suspected that he would not survive. We thus owe his lucid presentation of the fate of the victims of Nazi criminality to his equally lucid anticipation of his own fate under Communism. □