



Remembering Unsung Heroes Of The Holocaust

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Associated Press reported recently on some excavations in Warsaw that have received little interest outside of Poland, especially in the Jewish community.



Witold Pilecki: His burial place isn't known, his heroism is.

The work at the Powazki Military Cemetery should be of interest to Jews – the forensic scientists are looking for the remains, in a mass grave that contains entangled skeletons of resistance fighters, of one particular hero. Capt. Witold Pilecki, a non-Jewish Pole, volunteered to be captured and interned in Auschwitz in order to bring the Nazi death camp's atrocities to the attention of the world.

"He was unique in the world," his daughter, Zofia Pilecka-Optulowicz, told AP. "I would like to have a place where I can light a candle for him."

Until now, no one has been able to identify the remains of Pilecki, whom AP called "the only person known to have volunteered for Auschwitz." He was able to escape from Auschwitz in April 1943, when he realized that the SS might uncover his undercover

activities. He rejoined Poland's Home Army resistance force, fought in the citywide 1944 Warsaw Uprising, was arrested in 1947 by the communist secret security; falsely accused of planning to assassinate dignitaries, he was executed in 1948. Pilecki numbered among a small group of individuals who entered the Third Reich's killing fields of their own volition to shock the conscience of the world.

In the early days of the Third Reich, when political cabarets were still open and comedians – most of them non-Jewish, by that time – still dared to taunt the regime, one comedian in Munich, speaking of the nearby Dachau concentration camp, spoke of the site, which was known to the crowd. "Most impressive and well protected," he said. "The walls are ten meters high, with barbed wire along the top, electrically charged, and machine gun towers at every corner – still, I only have to say a word or two, and I'll be inside in a jiffy."

Getting *inside* a Nazi concentration camp or ghetto was easy. It happened to millions of people, against their wills. Going inside voluntarily, then getting out, then risking one's life to talk about it – that was hard.

In recent weeks, I've read books about three such people. "The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery," a biography of Pilecki. "The Man who Broke into Auschwitz," the story of Denis Avey,

a British soldier in a POW labor camp near Auschwitz who also put himself in harm's way to serve as a witness. And "Karski: How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust," about Jan Karski, a Polish diplomat, who arranged to step inside the Warsaw Ghetto.

All three men managed to return to freedom, and to tell their horrific stories – which often fell on deaf, often-unbelieving ears. All three books are suspenseful, inspiring, recounting bravery that few of us can imagine.

At the end of a report that he put together in 1945, Pilecki stated that "What I have written ... in these few pages is unimportant, especially for those who will read them just for thrills."

On the contrary, his words are of extreme importance to Jews and to any other community that suffered at the hands of the Nazis.

If the excavations at the Warsaw cemetery are successful, the people who owe an eternal debt to Pilecki's memory will have a site where they can properly honor him.

Yale University historian Timothy Snyder and David Marwell, director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, will discuss "The Auschwitz Volunteer" at the museum on Jan. 9 at 7 p.m. (646)437-4202.