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Louis Zamperini -- Meet Witold Pilecki

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If the name Louis Zamperini rings a bell, you may have read or listened to Laura Hillenbrand's riveting book, *Unbroken*, the true horror story of Zamperini's survival in brutal Japanese prisoner-of-war camps during WWII. If you've never heard of Zamperini, you probably will when the movie directed by Angelina Jolie is released. You may even see him during the run-up to it. He's 97 years old.

The name you've probably never heard is Witold Pilecki. Pilecki was a Catholic, a junior officer in the Polish army and, like Zamperini, a POW survivor. His particular corner of hell was Auschwitz. But what sets this prisoner apart is that Witold Pilecki was in Auschwitz because he WANTED to be there. The man volunteered to get arrested and sent to the death camp so he could write a first-hand report for his military superiors. That report, the horrors, triumphs and his escape, is now a potent audio and print book, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*.

This is a powerful story -- but in quite an unexpected way. If you're thinking *Schindler's List*, *Stalag 17*, *The Great Escape* or -- hold your breath -- TV's *Hogan's Heroes*, you'd be disappointed.

The Auschwitz Volunteer is not a theatrical narrative written to animate the drama. Pilecki is an army officer, not a poet. This is a straight-ahead, business-like report. "The more you stick to the bare facts without any kind of commentary, the more valuable it will all be," he writes. This oddly pro-forma style underscores Hannah Arendt's notion about the banality of evil.

Pilecki was a prisoner for nearly three years during the early period of Auschwitz when it was mostly used for Polish political prisoners, which he was, and for the extermination of Soviet POWs. It wasn't until two years later in 1942 that Jews started arriving in numbers for the "final solution."

Pilecki calls Auschwitz "The great mortuary of the living." The only way you leave, he says, is *as smoke coming out of the chimney*. People were "finished off" at the rate of 1,000 a day during a peak period.

The force of this book is two-fold. Yes, it's a factual, firsthand account of casual, monstrous brutality and the depth humans sink to when there are no moral rules or limits. But it's also about the glass half-full, about surviving under the most atrocious conditions.

It's the patch of white on a black canvas that draws us in.

As you listen or read this book, you can't help wonder: *How would I do under those conditions? Would I, could I, survive?* Survival for Pilecki was simple: "a man was seen and valued for what he really was." The camp was "a proving ground of character. Some slithered into a moral swamp. Others chiseled themselves a character of finest crystal. We were cut with a fine instrument... yet, in our souls, it found fields to till."

It boggles the mind imagining what fields these death camp prisoners had to till. Pilecki gives some answers. He writes he felt a semblance of happiness -- happiness about the solidarity which the camp's conditions had created amongst the Poles. Everyone was "united by the same anger." The captives were also not without some revengeful satisfaction. They'd gather their numerous fleas and plant them on unsuspecting Kapos, the privileged prisoners who served as barracks supervisors.

In what can only be called perverse irony, the man who survived well over 900 days in Auschwitz was arrested after the war as a western spy by the Polish Communist regime, tortured -- and executed. He was 47. His exploits were expunged from Polish history. Then, in the 1990s, he was fully exonerated posthumously and is now treated as a heroic figure in modern Poland.

You might ask how Pilecki's superiors reacted to his startling eyewitness report which was first received in 1941 by the Polish government in exile. It was then passed onto the Allies. Pilecki urged an attack on Auschwitz. No action was ever taken.

If you are wondering how you personally would deal with a place like Auschwitz, this 10-hour book from Brilliance Audio is an excellent opportunity to know what it takes - and what it gives. Narrator Merek Peobosz's moderate delivery, along with his Polish accent, adds an affecting reality and poignancy.

Auschwitz did give Witold Pilecki the perspective to write that only those who have experienced a death camp can really understand the greater meaning of life.