

FOREWORD

If ever war was justified—and this ‘if’ is a big one—it was the war against German Nazism that raged from 1939 to 1945. All its damage, death, and suffering were worthwhile, to get rid of the Nazi system; and in particular of the system’s concentration camps, which became an indispensable feature of it.

Of these camps, none were less than appalling. Among them the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex has a serious claim to be considered the worst; not only because it was much the largest. In all the records of what men have done to other men, there is no other place where so many people have been put to death so fast: over three million souls, in an area of fifteen square miles, in less than five years.

There are already a great many books on Auschwitz; a full list of books and articles on it would run to over seven thousand items. Why add another? Because it deals systematically for the first time with an element in the life of the camp that does extraordinary credit to its prisoners: the resistance movement that was created inside it and that, even in those conditions, the SS could never destroy. The author was for a short time a forced inmate himself, which gives him a special claim to touch the subject. Before he went there, he had been in resistance outside, as an officer of the Armia Krajowa, the Polish Home Army that was later decimated in the Warsaw Uprising. He had the good fortune to survive his months in Auschwitz. Looking back on them from a different circle of the SS inferno—Neuengamme, his next camp—he had insight enough to perceive traces of resistance activity in the place he had left:

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and could appreciate that he had had no chance to participate directly himself, because clandestine security in Auschwitz had to be so tight.

No one could pass through those camps without bringing searing memories away from them. Yet, thirty years on, Józef Garliński is able to master his emotions, and to compose as dispassionate, as impartial, and as comprehensive an account as the state of the surviving evidence he has seen allows. He lives in political exile, in west London; but has shown the tenacity and ingenuity to be expected of an old resister, in penetrating sources in contemporary Poland. Exile has provided one more barrier to be overcome, but no insuperable obstacle. He is as fair to the communist resisters as he is to their strongest Polish opponents; he is even as fair as he can be to the SS. He has simply followed his judgement and his sources, with what meticulous accuracy his footnotes testify; as does the award to him, for an earlier version of this book, of a doctorate by the University of London.

Yet this is a great deal more than a refurbished thesis. It is a memorial to some of the bravest of those millions of brave women and men who struggled, in the teeth of the evidence, in spite of ordinary 'commonsensical' prudence, to resist the apparently irresistible juggernaut of Nazism. The Poles, defeated in the first three weeks of war—occupied by both their secular enemies in combination, then fought over by them, and wholly occupied by each in turn—had an infinitely tougher war than the unbombed Americans, the unoccupied English, or even the comparatively gently handled French. Nevertheless, they had an exceptional record, even among the Nazi-occupied countries, for reluctance to accept the new ordering of Europe; and some of them did astounding things.

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Think for a moment of what Witold Pilecki, one of this book's central figures, did: he let himself be arrested by the Germans, in the deliberate hope that he would be sent to Auschwitz; succeeded in this aim; and then succeeded in two more, even more daunting. He set up the nucleus of an anti-Nazi organization in the camp; and then escaped from it, to pass out word of what was happening inside. (Escape from Auschwitz was more common than from camps that were within German-speaking territory; over six hundred escapers are recorded, of whom about a third got away.) This is the sort of man with whom the following pages deal. They provide a clear, unadorned record of a story that needs no adornment: the tale of what people can do, at their last gasp from every normal point of view—military, medical, social—to show what strength and toughness and dignity and compassion lie in mankind.

M. R. D. Foot

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