



The portrait of the author in the uniform of a Polish Cavalry Cadet was taken when he was twenty years old (1933/1934). The same picture was later used in 1944 by friends of his in Warsaw to make forged documents intended to help him escape from Wittenberge, a small sub-camp of Neuengamme. The author had been transferred there from Auschwitz in August 1943. The courier bringing the documents to Wittenberge never arrived and the escape plan fell through. On 4th May, 1945, the author was freed by the Seventh Armoured Division of the American Army.

PREFACE

During my imprisonment in Auschwitz in 1943 I did not have any direct contact with the underground movement. I was in the Penal Company, in a block isolated from the rest of the camp.* Several dozen prisoners from my transport were sent there, probably on the instructions of the Gestapo in Warsaw, whence we had come. Before my arrest, I had belonged to the Polish underground military organization, the Home Army, and in the camp I noticed several signs that an underground prisoners' organization was operating there.

At that time, struggling to survive, I did not spend too much time on the matter, but, in the same year, I was transferred to another camp at Neuengamme near Hamburg where, living in better conditions than in Auschwitz, I found out very much more about the underground camp organization. After the war I often thought about it, but only a few years ago was I able to study it seriously. I was encouraged, in fact almost forced to do so, by the memoirs of a former Auschwitz inmate, Witold Pilecki,† who went voluntarily to the camp in order to build up an underground military resistance movement. These memoirs, in the form of

* Prisoners were sent to the Penal Company for various offences in the camp. Sometimes they went there on the recommendation of the local Gestapo responsible for their deportation. As well as the twenty-five strokes, which every prisoner received on entering the Penal Company, there were cruel discipline, work after the evening roll-call, being driven on with clubs, and so on. The men's Penal Company was situated in Birkenau, the women's in the sub-camp of Budy. [Note to 2nd edition: The Penal Company was originally located in Block 13 (new number Block 11) of the central camp, and moved to Birkenau in May 1942.]

† The name Pilecki is pronounced 'Piletski'.

PREFACE

a concise military report, which is to be found in the Polish Underground Movement (1939–1945) Study Trust in London, made a great impression on me.* I realized that it was a very significant historical document, dealing with completely unknown details of certain underground activities during the last war. These activities testify to the great reserves of courage, determination and self-sacrifice which reveal themselves at times when the struggle for human dignity and freedom must be undertaken.

When deciding to write on this subject I was aware that one of the greatest difficulties would be the lack of German documents relating to the whole question. They would have been in the files of the Auschwitz Political Department (camp Gestapo), which contained reports submitted by responsible SS men, testimonies of prisoners accused of underground activity, reports by camp informers, details of escapes, and correspondence with the authorities in Oranienburg and Berlin. The possession of such material would have made my task very much easier, and would have provided some indication as to how far the SS were aware of this undercover work. It would also have been possible to compare such information with the testimony of the underground workers themselves.

Unfortunately these documents no longer exist. For several months before the evacuation of the camp, the authorities had begun to destroy all the documents concerning mass killings, followed by all the administrative files, among which, of course, were those of the Political Department. Auschwitz, where so many people were put to death during the last war, was given special attention by the SS when it came to concealing traces of these crimes. The destruction of the camp's Gestapo files was

*Note to 2nd edition: Pilecki's report has been translated to English and published by Aquila Polonica under the title *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*. Citations in this book to Pilecki's report refer to the original Polish-language typescript.

PREFACE

not peculiar to Auschwitz. The archives of Buchenwald are today to be found at the International Tracing Service at Arolsen in West Germany, but with one important omission: there are no documents relating to the Political Department.

As a result of this, in studying the question of the Auschwitz underground it has been necessary to concentrate on Polish documents which survived the last war. Undercover communications with the camp were solely in Polish hands. Orders and reports, both Polish and international, originating from the camp underground were sent to the Polish resistance forces in occupied Poland, who forwarded them to the Polish Government and General Staff in London. All documents relating to the occupation of Poland during the last war were sent, after it was over, by the political and military authorities to the Polish Underground Movement (1939–1945) Study Trust, and it was of these archives that I made the greatest use. Another extensive source of material consists of the archives and publications of the State Museum of Auschwitz. My status as a political refugee has not allowed me to visit Poland, but a great number of personal contacts, dating from the war years and from my own imprisonment in Auschwitz, have enabled me to obtain almost everything I required. I felt that those who gave me help did so in the belief that the resulting work would give a true picture of what had taken place.

In addition to these two essential Polish sources, it has been necessary to consult the archives of the International Tracing Service in West Germany, which include the surviving dossiers of all the German concentration camps. This evidence has been supplemented by thousands of additional documents, based on personal accounts, publications and research. I spent many very busy days at the International Tracing Service offices, and I have been in constant contact with it since then.

PREFACE

I have also used the collections of the Wiener Library in London, the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation in Amsterdam, the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the BBC Written Archives Centre in Reading.

However, access to the archives and collections of the above institutions provided only incomplete results, and had they been the sole sources of information, the detailed work on Auschwitz's underground movement could not have been possible. It has been necessary to delve into a far wider selection of publications, which have appeared in many languages and which deal with, or contain information on, the Auschwitz underground. Some works are devoted exclusively to this subject. It is significant that not a single one of these has appeared in West Germany. It must be stressed that some of these publications are suspect: political considerations have obliterated or falsified the record of events.

But neither documents nor publications are the basis of my work. I have relied on unpublished, personal statements. I have had to seek out former Auschwitz inmates living in Poland and elsewhere in order to gain facts and information, often in the strictest confidence. I have had to arrange personal meetings, use questionnaires and correspondence extensively, in order to achieve the necessary results. Every fact has had to be rechecked, every answer weighed in the light of the informant's character. Some of my letters were never answered, and many of my informants, especially those in Poland, whom I managed to convince of the importance of cooperation, have asked for their confidence to be respected. The subject, as I have said, has been exploited and distorted for political reasons. Very often I was able to gain necessary information thanks to the fact, which inspired trust, that I myself had been a prisoner in Auschwitz.

PREFACE

Naturally a considerable part of my work has been based on the memoirs of Witold Pilecki, whom I mentioned earlier. A close examination of his character, of his past and of his idealist convictions, leads me to believe that his narrative is true and that its facts are correct. I have of course checked them and have compared them with other sources.

I have presented the underground movement chronologically as it developed over the years, interweaving it with the story of the camp itself. Changes in and around the camp affected underground work, and I have also dealt with the most important sub-camp, Birkenau, and the women's camp there; I have mentioned other sub-camps, such as Monowice, only superficially, since there are very few facts to go on, and their distance from Auschwitz meant that their underground efforts were really quite separate.

Extensive efforts have been made to supply prisoners' camp numbers and they appear in the index. If the number is missing, this means that it is not recorded in the archives of the Auschwitz Museum, the International Tracing Service or the many publications and other accounts. Knowing a prisoner's number is very important, since it allows an accurate assessment of his or her date of arrival in the camp. This is possible thanks to the excellent work done by Danuta Czech in her 'Kalendarz wydarzeń w obozie koncentracyjnym Oświęcim-Brzezinka' ('Calendar of Events in the Concentration Camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau').

I have adopted the principle of approaching each source critically, in order to check each fact. I have accorded greater significance to some writers, having arrived at the conclusion that they are objective and less likely to indulge their fancies. Sometimes one source alone was adequate for substantiating a fact.

In this work, which is documentary in character, I have tried to avoid too frequent analysis and interpretation, believing that

PREFACE

the facts speak for themselves. Sometimes, when it has been impossible to ascertain all of them, I have had to resort to inference. In doing this I have attempted to present the truth and not defend any point of view or attitude.

I am well aware that amongst the prisoners in Auschwitz and its sub-camps there took place secret religious services, cultural activities, lectures and various attempts at teaching and learning. I have had to omit them from this account, since they were not organized on any permanent basis and do not constitute an underground movement in the full sense of the word. They were, of course, a demonstration of protest at the iron ring which the SS had tightened around the prisoners; they were a sign of rebellion against the system whose aim was to stun and destroy. My work, bounded as it is by well-defined limits, cannot include them, although they had great significance for the operation of the underground movement.

All forenames, surnames and place-names are written in their native spelling. The SEER system of transliteration has been used for Russian names. SS ranks and appointments, as well as expressions commonly used in the camp, have all been translated into English. A list of SS ranks and their British equivalents is included in the appendices.

This book would have appeared much later and with more imperfections had it not been for the professional advice and assistance of Professor Michael Foot, Professor James Joll and Dr. Antony Polonsky, to all of whom I am deeply indebted. I owe a similar debt to my friend from Auschwitz, Jerzy Budkiewicz, who is at present a full-time employee of the International Tracing Service in Arolsen. I have relied on his assistance for some years and his replies to dozens of questions and letters. I have also received help from the historical institutions mentioned earlier.

PREFACE

I must express my special gratitude to all those men and women, ex-prisoners of Auschwitz, who, by letter or conversation, recounted to me their experiences and details of the underground movement in the camp. It is impossible to mention them all here by name, and in any case many wish to remain anonymous. I want to assure them that I have done my utmost to ensure that the information received from them has contributed to the creation of an objective picture of the underground movement in Auschwitz. It is one of the least known secrets of the Second World War.

Józef Garliński
London, June 1974

