



FOREWORD

During World War II, a time of unprecedented darkness on earth, heroic men and women rose up and, calling upon the highest resources of the human spirit, took action against evil. Many such people were thrust unwillingly into situations that challenged them physically, emotionally and morally, but they rose to meet the challenge. Others, a much smaller number, actively courted danger in order to battle the evil.

One who stands out in that unique, smaller company of heroes is Polish Army Captain Witold Pilecki, who volunteered for an almost certainly suicidal undercover mission at Auschwitz.

Pilecki is a shining example of heroism that transcends religion, race and time. Yet his story, one of the most dramatic missions by an Ally in World War II, is virtually unknown in the West.

Why isn't Pilecki better known? There is a simple answer: his story was intentionally suppressed by the postwar communist regime in Poland—because Pilecki's heroism did not stop with his nearly three-year-long Auschwitz mission.

FOREWORD

Continued

After his escape from Auschwitz, Pilecki worked in intelligence with the Polish Home Army, fought in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, and was taken prisoner by the Germans. He ended the war in a German prisoner of war camp. Then in late 1945, he volunteered for another undercover mission: to return to Poland, where conditions were chaotic at war's end as the communists were asserting control, and secretly gather intelligence for the Polish government-in-exile.

This, tragically, became his final mission. Pilecki was arrested as a Western spy by the Polish communist regime, tortured, and executed in 1948 at age 47. His heroic exploits were expunged from Polish history.

Now, for the first time, English-language readers will have a chance to discover, through his own words, this remarkable man who risked everything to organize against the unspeakable evil of Auschwitz and tell the world about the horrible realities of this now-infamous death camp. If heeded, Pilecki's early warnings might have changed the course of history.

Pilecki's eyewitness account covers the early period in Auschwitz's existence: from September 1940, shortly after the Germans opened the Auschwitz concentration camp, through April 1943 when Pilecki escaped. His report provides firsthand information about less well-known aspects of Auschwitz—e.g., its initial function as a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners; the extermination of Soviet soldiers taken as prisoners of war; the first intimations and subsequent execution of the Nazi German “final solution” for Jews, which began in earnest in 1942.

Pilecki's experience and observations provide a perspective that fills in the overall picture of Auschwitz. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in the Holocaust. It is also, perhaps unintentionally, the portrait of a man of

conscience faced with unimaginable horrors, as Pilecki opens what is supposed to be a strictly factual account with these words:

They have told me: "The more you stick to the bare facts without any kind of commentary, the more valuable it all will be."

Well, here I go . . . but we were not made out of wood, let alone stone, though it sometimes seemed as if even a stone would have broken out in a sweat.

When God created the human being, God had in mind that we should all be like Captain Witold Pilecki, of blessed memory. May the life of Witold Pilecki inspire us all to do one more good deed, of any kind, each and every day of our lives.

Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland

Warsaw, Poland

December 2011