



THE AUSCHWITZ VOLUNTEER
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Preceding page:

Witold Pilecki with his young nephew Marek Ostrowski—son of Eleonora Ostrowska, 1940.

Pilecki Family

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On the first page of his report, Captain Witold Pilecki writes that he has been advised to “stick to the bare facts without any kind of commentary.” Was he able to do that or are there moments in the book when his feelings are revealed?
2. During his incarceration at Auschwitz, the author survived the relentless brutality that felled so many of the other prisoners. What techniques did he use to stay alive?
3. What did Pilecki hope to accomplish during his undercover mission at Auschwitz? Was he successful?
4. Pilecki’s intelligence reports smuggled out of Auschwitz were among the first reports to reach the Allies about the Germans’ treatment of Jews and the establishment of an extermination camp. What impact did these reports have?
5. When the author volunteered to undertake his dangerous mission in Auschwitz, he put himself and his family at grave risk. “How much easier it would have been simply to lower the brim of one’s trilby and take the quiet route to anonymous obscurity,” notes translator Jarek Garliński. What do you think motivates heroes like Pilecki to act as they do?
6. Under what circumstances is it legitimate to endanger the lives of others to further your own laudable goals? Give examples from history.
7. What role—if any—did the author’s Catholic religion play during his imprisonment?
8. Eventually the author concludes it is time to escape from what he calls “hell.” What finally prompts his decision?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Continued

9. A strain of patriotic pride runs through Pilecki's report. For example, he writes of "the Poles' fine physiques," and that "Poles were always the best workers in every kommando." What role does pride play in the face of dehumanizing treatment? Is it ballast for the soul and spirit?
10. In what ways did *The Auschwitz Volunteer* enlarge your knowledge of World War II, the efforts of the Polish Underground, and the part played by Auschwitz during the war?
11. Pilecki was the married father of two young children when he volunteered to organize a resistance and smuggle intelligence out of Auschwitz. Discuss the personal sacrifices made by heroes like Pilecki—men and women who believe it is their duty to risk their lives for the greater good of society.
12. Pilecki wonders how he could inspire anyone else if he admitted that he was overwhelmed by the situation. Discuss the qualities that distinguish a leader.
13. At one point, Pilecki says: "The mask of apparent passivity was a burden, when we were ready and eager for action." In order to carry out his mission, Pilecki had to submit to brutal, punishing domination for nearly three years, instead of acting forcefully against the enemy. This is one type of heroism. Discuss all the different types of heroism. Can they be measured against each other?
14. Pilecki dutifully followed the Polish military motto of "God, Honor, Country" above all else. How do you think this applies, if at all, to military combatants in recent conflicts?
15. Why did the Germans establish Auschwitz? How could it have been seen to further German war aims? How did Auschwitz evolve during the period Captain Pilecki was there?
16. What categories of people were sent to Auschwitz by the Germans? How did their treatment vary?
17. Was there any historical precedent for this sort of treatment of such prisoners, and if so, what was it?

- 18.** Why did the Germans not respect the Geneva Conventions on the Eastern Front, but instead sent Soviet prisoners of war to a concentration camp rather than a POW camp? How did the Germans treat other Allied prisoners of war?
- 19.** What was the German motivation for the “Final Solution” and their decision to begin murdering Jews in cold blood at Auschwitz? What could they hope to gain?
- 20.** Discuss the German legal concept of *Schutzhaft* (protective custody).
- 21.** Discuss the implications of the phrase “Arbeit macht frei.”