



2012-049

Witold Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*. Trans. Jarek Garliński. Los Angeles: Aquila Polonica, 2012. Pp. liv, 401. ISBN 978-1-60772-009-6.

Review by Daniel Ford, Durham, NH (cub06h@gmail.com).

Witold Pilecki was a good-looking officer in the Central European mold, with a high collar and an array of ornate medals won in the Russo-Polish War of 1918-21 that established Poland's eastern frontier and stopped communism's western expansion for eighteen years. When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Pilecki led a cavalry squadron bravely but with little effect against the blitzkrieg. (The Soviet Union, still smarting from that 1921 defeat, meanwhile seized the eastern half of Poland.) He then returned to Warsaw and began a quieter war, helping to form the *Tajna Armia Polska* (Secret Polish Army), as the first resistance group of the Second World War.

To house unruly Poles and intimidate the rest, the Germans built a *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camp) in the town of Oświęcim, designated *KZ Auschwitz*. Its purpose and its management were sealed behind barbed wire. The thirty-nine-year-old Pilecki resolved to penetrate its mysteries and report them to the outside world. To that end, on 19 September 1940, he stepped into a street roundup in Warsaw and was sent to Oświęcim/Auschwitz, where he became inmate number 4859. (He was not tattooed. That came later, as the camp's intake swelled from thousands to millions.) His report of the experience has the impact of hammer blows: "How naive we were there in faraway Warsaw about the Poles who had been shipped off to the camps. Here on the ground you didn't have to be a 'political' to lose your life. They killed whoever was at hand. The first thing was a question thrown out in German by a striped man with a club: 'Was bist du von zivil?' [Hey you, what's your civilian job?] Replying priest, judge, lawyer, at that time meant being beaten to death" (17).

Pilecki's "striped man with a club" was not a German, but a Pole like himself. Auschwitz's earliest inmates were privileged above all others, because they had the opportunity to bond with their overseers and rule those who came later. The worst were the inmates numbered 1 and 30, Bruno Brodniewitsch and Leo Wietschorek: "two bastards before whom everyone trembled in fear. They murdered in front of everyone, sometimes using clubs or fists" (31).

But even to be number 4859 was something of a privilege. In the early years, whether one lived or died at Auschwitz was largely a matter of working inside as opposed to outdoors, and the indoor jobs went to the early arrivals or those with a connection with them.

The difference between "to be" and "not to be" was so enormous, so greatly did the conditions vary for those who worked indoors in stables, stores or workshops from the mass who were being finished off in the most varied ways in the open air. The former were recognized to be necessary; the rest paid with their lives for the need, the requirement, to finish off as many people as possible in this grinder. There had to be a price, a justification for this distinction. The price was a skill, or ingenuity in place of a skill. (100)

The best job was swineherd. The pigs got the slops from the German mess only after the prisoners had had their turn with them. Taking care of horses could also save a life: the lucky prisoner would milk the nursing mares and share the nourishment with their foals. Later, as the extermination mill geared up, the best jobs were in the post office (where living inmates intercepted parcels addressed to the dead) and in "Canada," the warehouse where personal effects were taken when their owners were incinerated. Gold was also prized, but the only paper money taken was dollars; lesser banknotes were left to blow away or used as toilet paper. Hunger was a constant companion of those without such desirable assignments: "There were times when one felt oneself capable of cutting off a piece from a corpse lying outside the hospital" (72).

Jews, of course, were targeted from the beginning—as were Catholic priests—but the first prisoners to be exterminated *as a class* were the "Bolsheviks," as Pilecki calls them, the Red Army prisoners who arrived

in August 1941. As an experiment, seven hundred Soviet officers were locked in a barrack room “so tightly that none of them could sit”; then soldiers in gas masks “threw in a few gas canisters and observed the effects” (131). In November, the Russians were assembled in groups of up to a thousand and marched naked into a newly built gas chamber and incinerated in the newly built crematorium. Pelicki states that 11,400 were gassed or “finished off at work ... by means of beating, hunger and freezing” (136).

Everything changed in spring 1942. The Russians were gone, the last of them worked to death in the construction of a satellite camp two miles away in the village of Brzezinka, which the Germans called Birkenau. The priests were sent to Dachau. (Pilecki regards this as a comparatively easy assignment, attributable to pressure from the Vatican.) Even the Jews were relieved of their awful assignments and “placed in good conditions in indoor jobs.... Jews from almost the whole of Europe were brought here—to Auschwitz. After a few months of writing letters about the good conditions which they were enjoying, the Jews were suddenly rounded up from their jobs and quickly ‘finished off.’ Meanwhile, Jews arrived daily by the thousand from the whole of [German-occupied] Europe and were sent straight to Birkenau...” (155–56).

The satellite facility was intended from the beginning to be a *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camp) and, after its construction, Auschwitz reverted to an *Arbeitslager* (work camp), where survival, though certainly not assured, was at least possible. Pilecki was among the survivors, due largely to the resistance group he established. His original goal had been an organization powerful enough to break out of Auschwitz with the help of the Polish underground or an Allied bombing attack.

That help never came—may never have been feasible—but Pilecki nonetheless informed the world about conditions in the camp. He organized escapes for friends who carried dispatches to Warsaw and he used stolen parts to build a radio transmitter. In December 1942, thanks to such smuggled reports, the Polish government in exile in London published *The Mass Extermination of the Jews in German Occupied Poland*,¹ if not the first, certainly a very early eyewitness testimony to the Holocaust.

In April 1943, Pilecki himself escaped to resume his underground career. He fought in the doomed Warsaw uprising, ending up in a German prison from which he was freed in July 1945. He made his way to Italy, joined the 2nd Polish Corps of the British Army, and typed a detailed version of his Auschwitz experience, with many handwritten corrections and additions. He then returned to Warsaw, where he was imprisoned, tortured, and killed by the communist government forced upon Poland by the Soviet Union.

Witold Pilecki’s remarkable memoir vanished for more than half a century.² The small specialty publisher, Aquila Polonica, has now re-issued it as *The Auschwitz Volunteer*, in a new translation by Jarek Garliński, with an introduction by the British historian Norman Davies and an affecting salute by Poland’s chief rabbi, Michael Schudrich. Excellent maps and photographs complement what amount to words from the grave, a firsthand account of the earliest moments of one of the greatest crimes in human history.

1. Subtitle: *Note Addressed to the Governments of the United Nations on December 10th, 1942, and Other Documents* (London: Hutchinson, 1942).

2. It first appeared in Adam Cyra, *Ochotnik do Auschwitz: Witold Pilecki (1901–1948)* [Volunteer to Auschwitz ...] (Oświęcim: Chrześcijańskie Stowarzyszenie Rodzin Oświęcimskich [Christian Association of Auschwitz Families], 2000), available online at in an English translation by Jacek Kucharski – www.miwsr.com/rd/1211.htm.