

MR Review Essay



CAPTAIN WITOLD PILECKI

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PHOTO: Witold Pilecki, c. 1930.

WITOLD PILECKI JUST about signs his own death warrant by allowing himself to be sent to Auschwitz; for that reason, one realizes immediately that Pilecki was a special man whose moral code is rare. His underground army superiors did not order him to do so; it was his own idea. There is a post-modern tendency to sully heroes and their idealism, but Pilecki is no holy fool. His Catholic faith, spirit of friendly good-fellowship, and patriotism buoy him. What were the sources of these traits that may help us understand why he volunteered to infiltrate and how he survived Auschwitz? The most striking characteristic in his upbringing was his parents' determination to preserve the family's Polish identity.

Pilecki was born on 13 May 1901 in Poland (where independence had not existed for over 100 years). The Third Partition (1795) expunged Poland, and the Russian Empire absorbed much of it; the Germans and Austro-Hungarians engulfed the remaining territories. Technically, Pilecki was born a Russian, although Russian authorities tried to suppress the family's heritage. Countless major and minor Polish uprisings bloodied the 19th century, and Pilecki's ancestors were participants in the January Uprising (1863-1864). As punishment for their disobedience, the Russians seized much of their property, forcing them into a life of exile. Pilecki's father, Julian, a child of this revolution, eventually graduated from the Petersburg Institute of Forestry and accepted a forester position in the Russian region of Karelia, northeast of St. Petersburg, causing him to study in and work with the Russian language. He married Ludwika Oslecimska, a Polish woman, and together they had five children; Witold Pilecki was the third child.

Living in Russia proper took a toll on the family. Julian was concerned with the quality of the children's schooling and more troubled with the children's assimilation into Russian culture and language. In 1910, he moved his family to Polish Wilno (now Vilnius, Lithuania). However, the family's patriotism came with a cost—Julian had to remain in Karelia because he was a senior inspector and the family could not afford to lose the income. Before and during World War I, Pilecki's father was not a constant presence in his life. Perhaps the sacrifice made by his father would later serve as a model for Pilecki's own sacrifices. Given the family legacy of duty to Poland, perhaps Pilecki would have learned from an early age, too, that sacrifice to the cause is more than a romantic notion.

Hemingway, Owen, and Remarque have taught us to be suspicious of facile patriotism, and have exposed its destructive underpinnings. For them, it is not sweet and fitting to die for the fatherland. However, when we shift our Western eyes to Eastern Europe, the viewpoint of dying for one's country carried less cynicism than it did for the "lost generation." When one begins to understand that during the time of imperial occupation "Poland" only existed in the mind and heart, then one will realize what made Pilecki, the man.

The move to the Russian-controlled territory of Poland was an improvement—Pilecki was able to attend a better school and was able to visit his Polish kinsmen. The phase before World War I marks another important influence in Pilecki's life as he joins the scout movement, which at the time was illegal. The Russian imperial political police kept watchful eyes on the groups of highly organized, trained, and patriotic youth. Although World War I disrupted Pilecki's formal education, the scouts were Pilecki's constant. As his mother and siblings moved around to avoid the Eastern Front, Pilecki as a teenager founded several scouting regiments and organized educational courses for youths.

He returned to Wilno to restart his formal education, but this time in Eastern Europe was extremely chaotic. The Russian Civil War (1917-1922) interrupted his studies, and again the scouts influenced his life. Under the command of General Władysław Wetjko, he joined other scouts to fight the Bolsheviks.

Poland became independent in November 1918, and Pilecki joined the newly formed Polish army and fought in the lancer troop unit. He was discharged in the autumn of 1919 but, because of hostilities between Poland and the Soviet Union, he was forced to rejoin the Polish army to fight in the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1921). Poland prevented the Soviets from advancing westward to transform Europe into a Communist continent. He participated in the "Miracle of the Vistula" campaign in August 1920.

After the Polish-Soviet War, Pilecki returned to school, earning his high school diploma. He deepened his commitment to the scouts, became a noncommissioned military officer, and ultimately took a 10-month course to become a cavalry reserve officer. Pilecki had to terminate his formal education. His family's financial difficulties and his father's poor health motivated him to become head of the family. He was able to turn around what remained of the ancestral estate. He became a respected community leader and was deeply involved in community service. Pilecki somehow strikes a balance between his family obligations and his country, all the while maintaining ties with the Polish army. In 1926, he was promoted to second lieutenant in the reserves. In 1932, he established a military horsemen training program called *Krakus*, and later he took command of various squadrons. In 1931, he married Maria Ostrowska and had two children. This period was the longest Pilecki had with his own family.

Living between two aggressive and destructive totalitarian dictatorships, Pilecki battled the Nazis on 1 September 1939, the beginning of World War II. He refused to accept defeat and disobeyed orders to surrender his weapon to the conquerors of Poland; rather than escaping to Hungary or Romania—when it was still possible—to avoid becoming a prisoner of war, he chose to continue fighting in Poland. On 9 November 1939, along with his remaining fellow soldiers and senior officers, Pilecki cofounded the Polish Secret Army (*Tajna Armia*), one of many underground armies forming at the time. Later, most of the various secret military organizations—including Pilecki's group—consolidated and became The Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*).

That Pilecki managed to get to occupied Warsaw where he joined the underground and survived is truly a wonder. The joint Nazi-Soviet conquest (September-October 1939) and co-occupation (October 1939-June 1941) erased Poland's borders, choked Poland's leaders, and terrorized Poles. The Nazis unleashed Generalplan Ost, the colonization of Eastern Europe so that they could provide Germans their "living space" in Poland. To achieve it, *Generalplan Ost*, a series of planned murder, genocide, enslavement, expulsion, kidnapping, sterilization, starvation, incarceration, ban on education, and destruction of native culture programs, was put in place. Early programs included Operation Tannenberg (August-September 1939), Operation Intelligenzaktion (autumn 1939-spring 1940), and AB Aktion (spring 1940-summer 1940), which targeted and murdered mainly ethnic Poles. Some Polish Jews were killed in these early operations. Operation Reinhard, the program to exterminate Polish Jews, began in 1942.

Another part of Generalplan Ost was *lapanka*, the indiscriminate mass arrests of innocent passersby; the Wehrmacht or SS would suddenly seal off a city block, and all the civilians caught in the cordon would step into waiting trucks. Captured Poles were sent to labor or concentration camps; others were executed.

Early measures to crush the Poles were taken to such extremes that the Nazi security services complained that they needed additional support to keep up with the demands of those actions. Prison overcrowding strained their efforts to neutralize current and thwart future Polish resistance. Working under *SS-Gruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, *SS-Oberführer* Arpad Wigand proposed at the end of 1939 to create a new concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, specifically in Auschwitz (Oświęcim). The town's location was prime—

the confluence of the Vistula (Wisła) and Soła Rivers, good train connections, natural resources, and existing barracks. The Polish army had used the building structures prior to the war.

In fact, the quarters for Polish troops predate independent Poland. Auschwitz was founded by the Germans in the 1200s; however, soon after the German inhabitants abandoned the town, the Poles purchased and incorporated it in the Polish Kingdom. As a result of the Three Partitions (the last one in 1795), Auschwitz returned to being a Germanic town. When Auschwitz lay between the Germanic and Austro-Hungarian empires, it was an important seasonal labor center and emigration hub. As historians Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt point out, right before the start of World War I, imperial officials erected "twenty-seven brick dormitories for 3,000 workers, ninety wooden barracks to house an additional 9,000 men, and buildings for infrastructural services to support the life of the temporary community." During World War I the buildings were not used. After the war, Auschwitz became again Oświęcim in independent Poland. The Polish army used the structures. When the Nazis defeated Poland, they renamed the town Auschwitz.



Still photograph from the Soviet film of the liberation of Auschwitz, taken as the child survivors of Auschwitz, wearing adult-size prisoner jackets, stand behind a barbed wire fence, Auschwitz concentration camp, 1945. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Belarussian State Archive of Documentary Film and Photography)

Initially failing in January 1940 to meet the requirements of an SS commission that was sent by Inspector for Concentration Camps, *SS-Oberführer* Richard Glücks, the Auschwitz site was quickly championed by *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler, and the new Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz was established on 27 April 1940. On 4 May 1940, *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Rudolf Höss became the camp commandant. His orders were to immediately prepare the camp to hold 10,000 people.

The demands exasperated Höss because, as he claims in *Kommandant in Auschwitz* (1958), not only were the former Polish army barracks in a state of ruin, but also he was disappointed with the moral shortcomings of his SS staff. In spite of the eagerness of local SS functionaries to send their Polish prisoners to Auschwitz and the ambitions of Himmler for Auschwitz (creating a model German town and farming paradise), Höss received no support. He resorted to pilfering barbed wire from the countryside, going nearly 100 miles one way “to get a couple of huge cooking kettles for the prisoners’ kitchen, and I had to go all the way to the Sudetenland for bed frames and straw sacks.” He ordered 10-20 local Polish workers to repair the barracks and 300 local Jews to dismantle the homes of 1,200 local people forced to resettle. Höss needed the building materials from the homes, but also needed to remove all eyewitnesses and individuals who might help support escapees. By March 1941, there would be a 40-square kilometer region dubbed “area of interest” surrounding the entire Auschwitz complex—the zone was heavily patrolled.

Rapportführer Gerhard Palitzch, a noncommissioned SS officer who worked with Höss at Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1938, was sent to Auschwitz to assist Höss. Höss disliked the man, calling him a “most cunning and slippery creature,” and supposedly disapproved of the 30 convicted German criminals he brought with him on 20 May 1940 from Sachsenhausen. The 30 men served as “prisoner-functionaries,” specifically kapos. Kapos assisted the SS at concentration camps by supervising the “ordinary prisoners.” Kapos also terrorized and murdered camp inmates. Palitzch’s 30 men each received camp numbers from 1 to 30.

At this point, Auschwitz was not a death factory, daily murdering thousands of Jews. Auschwitz

Camp II-Birkenau, was not yet built. In 1940, the site (where numerous gas chambers and crematoria were eventually located) was still a Polish village named Brzezinka, approximately three kilometers from Auschwitz Camp I. Auschwitz was not yet the synthetic rubber factory called Auschwitz III-Monowitz (Buna). It was not yet the concentration camp system consisting of over 40 sub-camps. Auschwitz I-Main Camp was a political prisoner camp enslaving and massacring ethnic Poles. From the beginning, Auschwitz I was a house of horrors, but too few in the West know that the “Auschwitz” in their minds (extermination of Jews in gas chambers) would come into being in 1942.

Historian and chair of the historical department at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Franciszek Piper explains that the history of Auschwitz can be divided into two periods:

- A “Polish” period (1940 to mid-1942), when the majority of deportees and victims were Poles.
- A “Jewish” period (mid-1942 to 1945), when Jews represented the majority of deportees and victims.

Piper adds, “The total number of Poles deported to the camp lay somewhere between 140,000-150,000.” Piper also says, “The total number of those who died in the camp from 1940 to 1945 reaches 1,082,000; this figure rounded to 1,100,000, should be regarded as a minimum.” “Out of a total of 1,300,000 people deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau over the period from 1940 to 1945,” Piper concludes, “960,000 Jews (865,000 unregistered and 95,000 registered); 70,000-75,000 (74,000 Poles (10,000 unregistered and 64,000 registered)); 21,000 Gypsies (2,000 unregistered and 19,000 registered); 15,000 Soviet POWs (3,000 unregistered and 12,000 registered); 10,000-15,000 registered prisoners of other nationalities” were murdered by the Nazis. Moreover, one must bear in mind that the Nazis murdered close to 6 million Polish people—2.9 million Polish Jews and 2.8 million ethnic Poles.

On 14 June 1940, Auschwitz was not entirely ready when it received its first transport of victims. This first group consisted of 728 Polish political prisoners from a Nazi prison in German-occupied Tarnów, Poland, and included some Polish Jews. Some of these men were captured for participation in or suspicion of being members of resistance cells, for attempts of crossing the border to join



Hungarian Jews not selected as laborers would be murdered in the gas chambers almost immediately after arrival, May 1944. (Photo from the Auschwitz Album)

the exile Polish army in France, or for no reason at all. Because the first 30 camp identification numbers were assigned to the 30 German kapos, these 728 Polish men were given the numbers 31 to 758. Stanisław Ryniak, the first person confined in Auschwitz, received the number 31; at the age of 24, he was captured in May 1940 because the Nazis suspected him of being an underground member. Ignacy Plachta was given the number 758. Of the original 728 men first transported to Auschwitz, 239 survived, and few still live today.

From the second transport to Auschwitz, Kazimierz Piechowski (number 918) was one of many boy scouts captured and sent to the camp. On 20 June 1942, Piechowski was the leader of a group of three other inmates that escaped in the most daring and successful escape from Auschwitz. Stealing SS uniforms, weapons, and Höss's own car, the group drove out of Auschwitz, impersonating their tormentors, even interacting with real SS

subordinates. Piechowski's escape group carried and delivered one of the first reports on Auschwitz written by Pilecki.

Even with these arrivals, Auschwitz still was not fully operational. Because of damaged Auschwitz barracks, the political Polish prisoners were housed nearby in a former Polish Tobacco Monopoly building. Moreover, Kazimierz Piechowski (number 918) adds, "we had to help build it." Auschwitz was built and expanded by those who were confined there.

On 14 June 1940, Kazimierz Albin (number 118) recalled when Höss's second in command, camp commander *SS-Obersturmführer* Karl Fritzsche, accosted him and his fellow first transport members: "This is Auschwitz Concentration Camp . . . Any resistance or disobedience will be ruthlessly punished. Anyone disobeying superiors, or trying to escape, will be sentenced to death. Young and healthy people don't live longer than three months here. Priests one month, Jews two weeks. There is only one way

out—through the crematorium chimneys.” The use of gas to kill people began the following year. What Fritzsich meant was that once the Auschwitz victim was murdered by overwork, starvation, torture, bullet, lethal injection, or beating, his ashes would then be set free. Pilecki stresses, “the killing started the very day the first transport of Poles was brought.”

Wilhelm Brasse (number 3444), whose transport of 460 people arrived in Auschwitz on 31 August 1940, remembered witnessing Jewish men and Polish priests being degraded and worked to death. He saw SS-men and kapos hitching priests to carts and forcing them to pull carts like horses. Pilecki himself witnessed how Poles, Jews, and priests were harnessed to rollers in order to “level” the camp’s parade ground. In addition, kapos and SS-men were particularly sadistic toward Jews. Not only were Jewish victims finished off with overwork in penal companies, their camp tormentors would train dogs to kill them, restrain Jewish men and smash their testicles with hammers, and strangle Jewish men by ordering them to lay down and a kapo would place a spade’s handle on the man’s neck, placing all his weight on the handle. In Leszek Wosiewicz’s 1989 Oscar-nominated film *Kornblumenblau* (based on the experiences of Auschwitz survivors), an early scene depicts a kapo riding his men-drawn carriage around the camp. Hearing or reading about this episode is already unsettling; however, when viewing it, one becomes more demoralized.

By September 1940, Poles already knew to dread and, as best they could, to avoid Auschwitz. Pilecki is not a madman leaping senselessly toward his own destruction. He is not some blindly irrepressible optimist believing that will power, patriotism, and goodness will overcome. His self-appointed mission was to arrive in Auschwitz to establish a military organization to elevate morale; organize and distribute additional food, clothing, and supplies; gather intelligence about the camp, and train inmates to take over the camp and to assist the support troops that Pilecki believed would arrive to liberate the camp. The first phase of the mission was to create cells of resistance and support groups to aid fellow inmates. He felt “a semblance of happiness” when he sensed that the other inmates were beginning to come together to stand firm, as best as they could, against their tormentors. Another aspect

of Pilecki’s mission was to fight back, as best as he could, the SS-men and kapos. One memorable act of defiance was when Pilecki’s group cultivated typhus strains and infected SS-personnel.

There was no guarantee that Pilecki would end up in his intended target of Auschwitz. When he stepped into a roundup on 19 September 1940, he felt sure he would be sent to Auschwitz. Since the AB Aktion and roundups were still going on, the Nazis could have tortured and executed him in occupied Warsaw’s Pawiak, Mokotów, or any other Gestapo-run prison. They could have taken him to Palmiry to murder him in the forest. At the very least, they could have sent him to a forced labor colony somewhere in Germany. On 22 September 1940, Pilecki received Auschwitz camp number 4859; he says, “The two thirteens (composed by the inner and outer digits) convinced my comrades that I would die; the numbers cheered me up.” The fact that Pilecki avoided death for two years and seven months is miraculous. There were so many times that a blow from a kapo’s fist or baton could have been his last, that illness could have killed him, that the day’s execution list could have contained his name, that the Gestapo could have discovered his true identity (and they came very close to finding out)—his survival really is a miracle.

The remarkable element of Pilecki’s time in Auschwitz was the fact that his own escape was successful. The isolation of the camp, the camp’s 40-square kilometers “area of interest,” the intimidation and murder of the local population aiding runaways, the willingness of the locals to assist escapees, and the collective responsibility imposed upon the remaining Auschwitz inmates were very real inhibitors for escape. A shaved head, starved and unhealthy appearance, striped camp uniform, all stymied men and women from escaping. Pilecki must have been blessed not to be one of the 10-20 randomly chosen inmates that camp security would execute as punishment for another inmate’s escape attempt. Henryk Świeboccki estimates that “a total of 802 people escaped. The largest group of escapees was Poles (396), followed by residents of the former USSR (179), Jews (115), Gypsies (38) . . . 144 successfully escaped and survived the war.” Pilecki also explains that the Gestapo would and did arrest and send the escapee’s family members to Auschwitz. Pilecki’s assumed identity



Wall display of prisoner identification photos by the SS in Nazi-occupied Poland, 1942, created through force with both an unwilling subject and an unwilling creator, notably prisoner Wilhelm Brasse of Poland. (Image taken by Skyliber in Auschwitz concentration camp in 2004)

Nazi extermination policies toward those groups. He watched Soviet POWs build Auschwitz Camp II-Birkenau, which was to serve as a 100,000-capacity Soviet POW camp; however, he witnessed that same proposed-POW camp become instead the gassing facility to murder Jews upon arrival. Pilecki saw the victims of inhuman medical experiments performed on Jews and others, and saw the camp destroy the Roma and Sinti.

Pilecki witnessed the first experiment using Zyklon B gas. On 3-5 September 1941, and acting on his own initiative, Fritsch

helped his loved ones avoid this fate.

This exceptional book's value is obvious; nonetheless, one must consider the facts of to what extent the Allies dismissed Pilecki's various reports on Auschwitz. Throughout his time in the concentration camp, Pilecki smuggled out several intelligence reports about the camp by having inmates escaping Auschwitz to deliver his statements to the Polish Underground, who then forwarded them to the British and American governments. In autumn 1943, Pilecki submitted "*Raport W*," to the Polish exile government in London, which then forwarded it to the Allies. Both Raul Hilberg and Norman Davies say that once Pilecki's report was forwarded to the Office of Strategic Services (the U.S. intelligence agency) officials questioned its "reliability" and filed it away.

Pilecki was in Auschwitz during both the Polish period and Jewish period. His years of confinement distinguish, in my opinion, his eye-witness testimony from other intelligence reports on Auschwitz (for example, the three documents that make up the so-called *Auschwitz Protocols*). He was there for most of the building expansion phases, for most of the changes in policy toward every individual ethnic group, and for most of the executions of

placed about 600 Soviet POWs and 250 sick Poles in the basement of the infamous Block 11 in Auschwitz I-Main Camp, and filled the room with the gas; it was successful. After the Nazis refined the methods of killing with gas, Zyklon B was used in Auschwitz-Birkenau-Camp II to murder Jews, starting March 1942. Killing Jews with exhaust fumes from vehicles became the preferred method of murder in the other Nazi death camps (Treblinka, Sobibór, Chełmno, and Bełżec); Majdanek would use both Zyklon B and engine fumes to murder Jews.

In the recently declassified document (2000) dubbed *The Höfle Telegram*, British intelligence intercepted a coded Nazi cable, which, when deciphered, revealed that by 31 December 1942, 1,274,166 people had been murdered in Nazi death camps: Treblinka-713,555, Majdanek-24,733, Sobibór-101,370, and Bełżec-434,508. For some reason, the statistics of murdered victims from the Chełmno and Auschwitz death camps were not included. Based upon available sources, Franciszek Piper estimates that "for the years 1942-43, around 83,000 death certificates were issued for registered prisoners [in Auschwitz] . . . At the end of February or beginning of March 1943, death certificates

stopped being issued in most cases for registered Jews One can establish only around 100,000 cases of registered prisoners dying.” After 1943, Auschwitz became the largest killing site of Jews.

After his escape, Pilecki was frustrated when his underground superiors ignored his demands to invade Auschwitz. As he endured Auschwitz’s evil and watched as it murdered real heroic men and women, Pilecki’s sense of justice was offended by the limitations and reluctance of *the Home Army* and Allies. He spoke freely in *The Auschwitz Volunteer*, calling out their cowardliness. His outrage did not consume him; he fought on. During 1944, he continued his resistance work, trying to minimize the influence of the growing Soviet takeover of Poland. He participated as an anonymous infantry soldier during the doomed 1944 Warsaw Uprising, only revealing his rank when it was necessary. He later smuggled himself into Italy, joining the Polish II Corps, commanded by General Władysław Anders. It was in Italy that he wrote his memoirs—published now as *The Auschwitz Volunteer*—about his years in Auschwitz. He could have stayed in Italy, could have brought his family, and could have avoided the Soviets and Polish Communists. Instead, he chose to return to Soviet-influenced Communist Poland to engage in spy work.

Pilecki’s cover was blown in July 1946, and he was ordered to leave Poland. He disobeyed because he did not want to abandon his family, and he was unable to find a substitute for his undercover work. So, he stayed. His life was in serious danger. In a show trial known as “The Trial of the Sixteen” (18-21 June 1945), key leaders of the Polish Home Army were falsely found guilty of collaborating with Hitler and planning military action against the Soviets. Moreover, from the late 1940s to 1950s, the Soviet secret police and Communist Polish security services killed the remnants of the underground army, which was anti-communist.

Polish Communists captured Pilecki on 8 May 1947 and placed him in Warsaw’s Mokotów prison where its interrogators brutally tortured him for months. Pilecki’s friends from Auschwitz who survived tried to help him by pleading for help from a fellow Auschwitz survivor, the prime minister of Communist Poland, Józef Cyrankiewicz. Cyrankiewicz refused to help; moreover, he wrote a letter to the judge presiding in the case to throw out any

record of Pilecki’s time in Auschwitz. A man who shared in the same indignities as Pilecki sold him out; as the common expression goes, “with friends like these who needs enemies.” Pilecki’s torturers broke him, and he confessed to being an “enemy of the people.” Pilecki told a family member who visited him in prison that Auschwitz was a trifle, child’s play (*igraszka*) compared to the torture he received from his Communist persecutors. Pilecki’s photograph from this time is horrible to look at; he is almost unrecognizable.

Pilecki’s show trial began on 3 March 1948, and on 15 March 1948, the court sentenced him to death, finding him guilty of being a German collaborator, an anti-communist spy for the West, and numerous other charges. On 25 May 1948, Pilecki was executed. It is believed he was buried somewhere in Warsaw’s Powązki Cemetery; since 2012, investigators have exhumed several bodies from a part of the cemetery believed to be a common burial site for executed political prisoners during the Stalinist era of Communist Poland, expecting one of them to be Pilecki.

The importance of Pilecki’s heroism undermines a facile interpretation of history. Not all were bystanders, and many more than we are led to believe stood up and fought totalitarian evil. There were many “good guys” who did extraordinary things like Witold Pilecki, and the sad thing is, so few of us know these heroes. There seems a tendency to overlook or bypass a hero like Pilecki because his last name is difficult to pronounce (correctly) or for some other reason. The Holocaust is not an easy subject. There are some things that will be lost to the historian—documents, explanations, etc. That is why it becomes imperative to include the story of Pilecki in our classrooms. Pilecki is not some exotic footnote in specialized research. In “Speaking of a Mammal” (1956), Czesław Miłosz notes, “man cannot be reduced to just a part in history.” For decades, the memory of Pilecki “did not exist” in Communist Poland, and very few in the West knew of him. Students sometimes think that George Orwell’s *1984* was only a book, something that sprang from his imagination. Memory holes did exist. It is a challenge to teach students about totalitarianism because to them it seems so outrageous and alien. And, when Pilecki was rehabilitated finally in 1990,



Prisoners from the first transport to KL Auschwitz at the train station in Tarnów (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum Archives)

something good, for once, came out from the abyss. *The Auschwitz Volunteer* is truly a gift. However, how many other heroes remain in the memory hole?

Much has changed since Czesław Miłosz wrote *The Captive Mind* (1951), but his words are still relevant. He writes, “A *living* human being, even if he be thousands of miles away, is not so easily ejected from one’s memory. If he is being tortured, his voice is heard at the very least by those people who have (uncomfortable as it may be for them) a vivid imagination. And even if he is already dead, he is still part of the present.” Orwell did not need to suffer in a totalitarian regime to recognize the dangers of “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” Pilecki’s case makes Miłosz and Orwell’s insights all the more real, and Miłosz lived long enough to see that Pilecki returned as a presence in the now.

This history of World War II disillusioned us; the “good war” was not as straightforward or

principled as we would like to believe. Pilecki’s heroism may have been doomed, but his courage uplifts us. His example may be difficult to follow, but he shows what is possible. How are we finally to make sense of Pilecki? I am reminded of a well-known inscription found on the walls of the former Gestapo headquarters of occupied Warsaw, which today houses the Mausoleum of Struggle and Martyrdom Museum. It reads—

It is easy to speak about Poland.

It is harder to work for her.

Even harder to die for her.

And the hardest to suffer for her.

This epitaph defines Pilecki.

My one complaint about this edition of *The Auschwitz Volunteer* is that, even with the now available paperback edition, it is still too expensive to use in a college course. If we want our young people not to grow up cynically, we should not make it easier for them to become so by restricting them from knowing real heroes like Pilecki. **MR**