

be trusted; whether a camp guard has a shred of compassion, or none; whether a particular action will lead to a beating and death, or to survival; which side of the razor's edge could lead to life or death; and most important, whether the man beside him in a work detail or on the next cot will betray him. His summary of the central questions in a situation where betrayal was endemic is blunt:

Camp was a proving ground of character.
Some—slithered into a moral swamp.
Others—chiseled themselves a character of finest crystal.
Everyone eventually went through this process of transformation (p. 50).

His clarity of judgment leads him to make decisions that would be incredible if his account were not as detailed as it is. In the midst of this hell of betrayal and death, he begins to establish a network of cells of trusted members. The five Polish members of each cell do not know the members of any other cell. Inside Auschwitz, they work underground toward the goal of liberating the camp. Regardless of the effectiveness of this network, it is clear that it met a goal that Pilecki does not dwell on. These cells kept alive two things that are necessary for survival in hellish conditions—morale and hope. During Pilecki's three years in Auschwitz, some members of these cells die or are tortured, but no member betrays another member.

Near the end of his diary in 1943, he and a few friends plan an escape from the camp. Their escape is hair-raising. Even in their ravaged and weak condition, they are treated with the kindness of strangers by the Poles they encounter on their way toward Bochnia in eastern Poland. At one point they are spotted by German soldiers and come under heavy small arms fire, but they escape and are again assisted by Poles who themselves have next to nothing.

In spite of his heroism in fighting the genocidal Russian and German occupations of Poland, after the war Pilecki was tried as a traitor and Western spy by a Soviet-controlled court in Poland and executed. Two of the many photographs in the book reveal visually much of the trajectory of his life. It is difficult to believe that the youthful and thoughtful intelligence on the face of the young Polish Cavalry Officer Second Lieutenant Witold Pilecki (p. xxxvi) is that of the same man (p. 1) who was arrested in 1947 by the Ministry of Public Security, a Soviet front. Except for his eyes, he is barely recognizable—he has been beaten and tortured while in custody.

Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Seweryna Szmaglewska, Anna Pawełczyńska and others have also provided powerful descriptions of the conditions in Auschwitz but there is a different kind of power in the everyday intensity of the diary of this Polish officer. In German-occupied Warsaw, Pilecki volunteered to enter the hell of this death camp on Polish soil in order to return with the story of an Auschwitz volunteer, only to be murdered by the government of Russian-occupied Poland, his country, for the sake of which he volunteered for the hell of Auschwitz.

Witold Pilecki's diary has the courage to ask the difficult questions. Not philosophical, psychological, or aesthetic questions but a key question of the twentieth century—whether to betray someone in order to save oneself. This question was perhaps the central question of the last century. Would you betray others, and under what circumstances? The answer to this question looms even larger in our century. Many people seem to be unaware that in thoughtlessly betraying others, they are answering these questions without even asking them. ▲



MORE BOOKS

Poles in Wisconsin, by Susan Gibson Mikoś. Foreword by John Gurda. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press (<wisconsinhistory.org>, 2012. 134 pages. Index, maps, photographs. ISBN 978-0-87020-422-7. \$9.95.

A very competent compendium of Polish immigration to Wisconsin, the settlement of Poles there in the 1920s, Polish presence in Milwaukee, Polish schools and Catholic churches built by Poles, and the contribution of Wisconsin Polish Americans to the cause of Poland's liberty. The Foreword states that "for most of the twentieth century Poles comprised the state's second-largest ethnic group." Possibly the beginning of the road for a researcher analyzing the reasons why Poles have been virtually excluded from the circles of political power in Wisconsin (and in the nation). There now exists a modest library of books about Polish immigrants to various states of the Union, including such works as John Radzilowski's *Poles in Minnesota* (2005). ▲

