

editor's sources are possibly other anthologies, some of them forgotten or at least not properly acknowledged.

It should be pointed out that the Polish titles contain numerous errors. As for the literary portrayals, the editor attempts to give a balanced view of the historical development of Ashkenazi Jews in Polish lands. This is not an anthology prepared by a scholar and, I daresay, it is meant not for scholars but rather for those readers who are interested in the trials and tribulations experienced by Polish Jews, as well as those who experience nostalgia for old times or have other personal or intellectual reasons to be interested in the subject. What I find particularly valuable about the anthology is the image of the editor herself as projected through her selections, her enthusiasm for historical memory, and her ability to reassemble into a new and engrossing whole individual voices scattered throughout the history of the Ashkenazis in Poland. Δ

The Auschwitz Volunteer

Beyond Bravery

James E. Reid

By Captain Witold Pilecki. Translated by Jarek Garliński. Introduction by Norman Davies. Foreword by Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland. Includes illustrations, maps, numerous photographs, and an extensive index. Los Angeles, CA: Aquila Polonica Publishing [AquilaPolonica.com], 2012). 401 pages. ISBN 978-1-60772-010-2. Paper. \$34.95.

Poland was under German and Soviet occupation in 1940. At 6:00 a.m. on the morning of September 19, Polish Army captain Witold Pilecki walked down a Warsaw street alone and voluntarily joined a group of men who had been captured by the German *Schutzstaffel* (SS) for transfer to Auschwitz. The group was transported to this German concentration camp, where over one million people mostly Jewish, were murdered before the camp was liberated by Soviet forces in 1945.

Given what we know now about Auschwitz, Pilecki's choice may appear incredible but at that time little was known about the operation of Hitler's Final Solution that eventually killed six million Jews. What was known, for various reasons, did not lead to action by the Allies. Pilecki wanted to know what was taking place at Auschwitz and what had happened to two of his Polish Catholic comrades imprisoned there. He

eventually escaped from the camp to join the Polish Home Army and fight against the Soviet occupation of Poland at the end of the Second World War.

The Auschwitz Volunteer is a translation of the final version of his diary that covers the period from the day he volunteered for Auschwitz in 1940 until shortly after his escape from the camp in 1943. A literate and observant military officer, Pilecki was also possessed of a good memory. His diary is clear and precise, and it propels the narrative of his imprisonment forward with great force. In spite of its subject matter, the clarity of his writing makes the book difficult to put down. All of the details of the operation of Auschwitz that he observed are carefully recorded here. Did he hope that an accurate record would prevent genocides on this scale from occurring again? It did not, as Matthew White's recent book on atrocities has shown. We may hope that Pilecki's book helps to reduce the frequency of these horrors.

His diary has been published without any noticeable editing. By honoring Pilecki's words as written, Aquila Polonica Publishing places the reader inside Pilecki's thoughts and decisions as they unfold. We remain inside his descriptions of the blind luck that preserves one man's life and ends another's. An intrusive editor might have altered these lines that occur on one page in proximity:

they dug their metal talons into the disintegrating corpses.

In places small fountains of stinking pus spurted.

The beautiful horse chestnuts and apple trees bloomed (p.175).

Pilecki's commitment to vividly describe what he saw trumps any concern about his style. His book shares the characteristics of the need for truth with accounts of others who have survived intolerable and hellish situations. Some of these include Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, Gert Ledig's description of surviving the Allied saturation bombing of Germany in *Payback (Vergeltung)*, and a number of accounts by survivors of the starvation, cannibalism, and deaths of 40,000,000 people under Mao Zedong's rule. Many of these accounts share the detailed recall and sharp description of histories that must be told and preserved, but Pilecki's account is remarkable for its extensive description and attention to small details. These qualities are evident throughout this final version of the diary that he wrote after his escape. He has the capacity to quickly judge whether a fellow inmate can

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). ▲

