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CATHOLIC JOURNAL

\$2

VOLUME 25
ISSUE 9
25 MAY 2014

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Captain Witold Pilecki, the Auschwitz volunteer

Andrew Balcerzak reflects on the life of an extraordinary man who was described as one of the six bravest soldiers of World War II by British historian Professor Michael Foot in his book, *Six Faces of Courage*.

Witold Pilecki, whose anniversaries of birth (13 May 1901) and death (25 May 1948) occur this month, was a man whose whole life is an example of core Christian values and unbelievable heroism.

In the introduction to the book, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, wrote: 'When God created the human being, God had in mind that we should all be like Captain Witold Pilecki, of blessed memory.'

When Pilecki was born, his country Poland had not existed for more than 100 years, having been partitioned among its three powerful neighbours: the Kingdom of Prussia, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

He was born in the north-west of Russia, where his family had been deported 40 years earlier for challenging the occupier.

During these traumatic times Poland and its ideals continued to exist in the hearts and minds of people like Pilecki's family. Because speaking the Polish



Witold Pilecki

PICTURE BY TBOR KOMOROWSKI "ARMIA PODZIEMNA" WARSZAW 1990 / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS / PUBLIC DOMAIN

language was forbidden in public, mothers would teach their children to pray in Polish at home. And so, in spite of the intense Russification and religious persecution, the language, the Roman Catholic religion, the values and love for the non-existent country survived through generations.

Before and during World War I, young Pilecki was active in the Polish scout movement, an illegal activity under the occupiers. The scout movement continued the traditional values best expressed by the Polish adage, 'Bog, Honor, Ojczyzna' (God, Honour, Fatherland).

Many of Pilecki's generation lived by these values, which meant faith in God, self-sacrifice, sincerity, loyalty, integrity, respect for all people and patriotism.

After Poland gained independence in 1918, Pilecki joined the regular Polish Army. But the threats to his country intensified and reached a peak at the time of the Soviet invasion in 1920. The invasion was repelled, thus saving Poland and western Europe from communism.

For his contributions in the war, Pilecki was twice awarded the Cross of Valour.

But Pilecki was not interested in professional soldiering, and as soon as the war was over he went to pursue his studies in agriculture and then fine arts. He married in 1931 and moved to a farm to raise a family.

Pilecki's wife worked in the local school and he looked after the farm, home and children, and carried out extensive voluntary social work. In his spare time Pilecki wrote poetry and painted for his local church and friends.

He organised the local farmers to establish a milk cooperative, agricultural club and voluntary fire-fighting units, and he contributed to his society in many other ways which were recognised by the Polish Government when it awarded him the Silver Cross of Merit in 1938.

This happy life did not last long. On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland from the west and the Soviet Union invaded from the east. With Poland firmly in the grip of its two tyrannical neighbours, open resistance by the Polish people was futile. However, Pilecki and others continued fighting in the clandestine Home Army.

With the fall of Poland, the German and Soviet occupiers implemented their plan to murder millions of Polish citizens. The Wehrmacht (Germany's uniformed armed forces), the Gestapo and the SS undertook random street arrests and



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'I TRIED TO LIVE IN SUCH A MANNER THAT AT THE MOMENT OF DEATH I MAY BE GLAD RATHER THAN FEARFUL.'

WRITTEN BY WITOLD PILECKI IN WARSAW PRISON BEFORE HIS EXECUTION

screening of captives. Anyone declared an enemy was murdered or deported to an unknown location.

Such events took place on a huge scale. Pilecki suspected that some of his colleagues had been taken to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp. To confirm his suspicions, and to report on the state and treatment of prisoners in Auschwitz, Pilecki arranged to be captured under a false identity by the Germans and imprisoned in Auschwitz. He arrived in Auschwitz on the night of 21 September 1940 and was tattooed with the prisoner number 4859.

In Auschwitz, Pilecki organised many of the imprisoned officers into a clandestine organisation so as to gather intelligence on the state and treatment of the prisoners.

For the next three years Pilecki and his organisation helped weaker prisoners to survive, gathered intelligence and planned liberation of the camp. Pilecki's organisation passed intelligence to the Allies in which it authoritatively described the full horror of Auschwitz and the martyrdom of the majority of Polish-Catholic prisoners from 1940 to 1942.

The evidence included overwhelming information about the implementation of the Final Solution, a massive murder of Jewish people.

In 1942, the Polish Government in Exile sent a memorandum to the League of Nations entitled *The Mass Extermination of Jews in German*

Occupied Poland. The memorandum was largely ignored by the League of Nations, as were subsequent approaches by the Polish Government in Exile to Western Allied governments.

On the night of 26 April 1943, Pilecki, together with two other prisoners, escaped from Auschwitz. Three months later he reached Warsaw. There, Pilecki compiled a comprehensive report, 'Report W', for the Polish Resistance.

'Report W' is an astonishing historical document: it comprehensively details the evolution and horror of the massive crimes against humanity committed at Auschwitz between 1940 and 1943. The report includes references to treatment of Catholic priests: 'Kapos line us up, jeering wildly and exchanging jokes. They kill off sick and weak people or those who admitted to being a priest.'

Among the unspeakable horrors of the camp, Pilecki writes about the acts of humanity and sacrifice that this most horrible place could not purge: 'The commandant selected 10 inmates from our block to die. It was very difficult for us, yet we experienced a dignifying moment when a Catholic priest offered his life for a younger man who was selected to die. The commandant accepted the sacrifice and the young man was allowed to live.' This may be a reference to Fr (now St) Maximilian Kolbe, who saved Marian Gajowniczak by offering himself for a horrible death by starvation.

After completing his report, Pilecki continued to be active in the Polish underground and in 1944 he took

part in the Warsaw Uprising. Professor Norman Davies, in his authoritative book, *Rising 44: The Battle for Warsaw*, notes many of Pilecki's heroic actions against the overwhelming German forces.

After the uprising was suppressed, Pilecki was taken to a German POW camp. With the liberation of this camp in April 1945, Pilecki was freed and joined the ranks of the Polish II Corps in Italy.

In October 1945, Pilecki returned to Soviet-occupied Poland to collect intelligence on the Polish soldiers killed or deported to the Soviet Union by the Stalinist secret police and on the activities of the Polish puppet regime's security units. In May 1947, Pilecki was arrested by Public Security operatives, imprisoned and savagely tortured. A year later, Pilecki was subjected to a show trial and then killed.

Yet, the powerful Soviet authorities and Polish communists were so afraid of him and desperate to airbrush him from history that, after committing the judicial murder, they secretly buried his body in a grave that to this day has not been found.

In the introduction of the book, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, Professor Norman Davies wrote: 'Pilecki's name mirrors the tragic fate of millions whom the West forgot. Only when one grasps the true horror of his fate can one comprehend what the Second World War in Europe was really about.' ❏

Andrew Balcerzak is a parishioner of St Thomas Aquinas Church in South Yarra and a member of the Pilecki Committee, a small volunteer group formed to draw attention to the heroism and achievements of Captain Pilecki.



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