

2020-21 Foundation for the History of Totalitarianism Essay Prize
The winning essay on

Witold Pilecki



T h i s i s w h y I w r i t e

“The more strictly you will adhere to nothing but the facts, relating them without comments, the more valuable it will be.” So, I will try...

but we were not made of wood. Not to say of stone.

Witold Pilecki

Witold Pilecki’s life reads like a thriller but outlines a hideous truth; when things reach their extreme, they turn into their opposite. He opposed both the totalitarian regimes of far-right fascism and far-left communism; they

planned to share Pilecki's country which had only regained independence, after 123 years of occupation, in 1918. Each ideology was destroyed by its own extremism but not before millions of innocent Europeans had died through mechanized war and industrialised murder. As I read more about his story there was one thing that continually struck me: how many ideals his character embodied. Victor Frankl, an Austrian Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, wrote "what is to give light must endure burning" and, to me, Pilecki gave that light. Never have I been so awed by the deeds of one man. Pilecki has inspired me to carry his torch forward into my own life, to shoulder responsibility and to face the evils of today's world.

Raised as a patriot by his Polish nationalist parents, he defended Wilno from the Soviet Red Army during the partisan warfare of 1918. In 1919, a Polish-Soviet War began and Pilecki, as an 18-year old cavalryman, defended Poland again and was twice awarded the Polish Cross of Valour. Afterwards, in 1921, he married Maria Ostrowska and had two children: Andrzej and Zofia. He rebuilt his ancestral estate in Sukurcze, advocating rural development, and set up a dairy cooperative to ensure fair prices for the peasants of his local village. In 1932, he established a cavalry training school and remained active in the reserves. Pilecki received the Silver Cross of Merit for his community activism and his social work in 1938. He cared for those around him regardless of class and was the opposite of the caricature of the oppressive landowner.

On September 1st, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland, starting World War II, and two weeks later, on September 17th, the Soviet Union invaded Eastern Poland. Pilecki fought bravely as a cavalry commander and even after the Polish Army was defeated in weeks, he fought on in a partisan unit. Pilecki and his commander Major Włodarkiewicz started "The Secret Polish Army" in November. However, Włodarkiewicz blamed Poland's defeat on failing to create a Catholic nation and was negotiating with far-right groups; one had offered Germany a Polish puppet government. Pilecki was sensitive to the pathological tendencies of the ideologically possessed. Having already fought against the collectivist ideology of the Soviets, he was clear about his vision of an independent Polish nation. There was tension between the two men so Pilecki talked to the head of a rival resistance group which gathered intelligence on German atrocities and sent it to the Western Allies.

The Gestapo had arrested members of this group and sent them to the Auschwitz Camp in Oświęcim; little was known about this large prison. Włodarkiewicz nominated Pilecki to go there to organize intelligence-gathering and resistance.

Although presented as an invitation to volunteer, Pilecki regarded it as punishment for their disagreement. Yet, on September 19th, 1940, he allowed himself to be captured.

At Auschwitz he became inmate number 4859 and was told he had about six weeks life expectancy. Pilecki managed to survive for two and a half years, enduring the brutal cruelty of the Nazi guards, backbreaking work, lice infestations, typhus and pneumonia, extremes of heat, cold, and hunger; he kept a piece of bread in his pocket after the war, just in case. Working on renovating the flat of an SS officer, who was excited at the prospect of his wife's arrival, Pilecki realised that, outside the camp, the officer appeared

respectable, even normal, but once inside he became a sadistic murderer; the camp seemed to breed evil.

There was no knowing who would reach their breaking point; a decorated Polish officer might become a Gestapo informant. Pilecki was forced to watch his comrades die: “one died, as it were, with him” and he would eventually learn to detach his mind from his body’s suffering and the horror around him.

Pilecki organized the Union of Military Organisations in Auschwitz to improve morale, provide outside news, share food and clothes equally, and set up intelligence networks. He chose prisoners who showed altruism, like sharing a piece of bread or nursing a sick comrade. When Pilecki explained that he had volunteered to be in Auschwitz one recruit said, “you’re either the greatest hero or the biggest fool”.

Against all odds, Pilecki built a resistance network, organised escapes and sent valuable information outside, aided by brave locals like Helena Stupka and her 6-year-old son, Jacek, who collected and delivered documents. By 1942, Pilecki's resistance was broadcasting details of the arrivals and deaths in the camp using a radio that took 7 months to assemble using smuggled parts.

“Witold’s Report” estimated that “by March 1943, the number of people gassed on arrival reached 1.5 million”. It was the first comprehensive account of the Holocaust from a witness and a principal source on Auschwitz. The Allies' failure to act remains controversial, and Raul Hilberg wrote that the British filed the report away due to its “unreliable source”. After the British government’s use of fabricated atrocity stories in WW1 they were anxious about incorrect facts being seen as propaganda and were sceptical of claims from other governments. Sadly, in the spring of 1943, two thirds of the eventual 1.1 million victims were still alive; perhaps their deaths could have been averted.

In April 1943, Pilecki and two other inmates, Jan and Edek, escaped. Pilecki’s imperative was to broadcast the evil he witnessed in the camp. It was what kept him and his men fighting and formed the basis of his reports. He wanted those he met to feel his righteous anger yet people struggled to connect with this story. He wrote “I can no longer relate to my friends or other people [...] I didn’t want to be different but I was, after that hell”.

He fought on, preparing resistance against a Soviet occupation. Pilecki joined a secret anti-communist organization in November 1943 called “NIE” the Polish word for “no” and short for *niepodległość* (independence). He was captured in the Warsaw Uprising, which began on August 1st, 1944, and became a German prisoner of war. US troops liberated him on April 28th, 1945, and Germany surrendered on May 8th, ending the war, but the “Cursed Soldiers” of NIE were active until 1963. Frankl also survived Auschwitz and had similar insights to Pilecki: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” which I believe sums up why Pilecki did not give up his opposition to totalitarianism.

In July 1945, in Ancona, Italy, Pilecki wrote a hundred-page report about his experiences at Auschwitz and began his recollection of all he remembered. My essay is titled “This is why I write” which was the first line of Pilecki’s report. His mission had been to write down and concretise the facts and horrors of his experience at Auschwitz; yet his report was only published in English in 2012. This lack of interest led to him feeling as though he had somehow failed, when really it was the world that failed him.

Pilecki had gathered intelligence about Soviet atrocities and sent it to the London-based Polish government-in-exile as their relationship with the Soviet-backed regime of Boleslaw Bierut deteriorated. In 1946, any hope that Poland would be free disappeared as Soviet control expanded. The resistance soldiers in Poland were ordered to escape to the West or return to their civilian lives but Pilecki refused to do so.

On 8th May 1947, Pilecki was arrested by agents of the Ministry of Public Security and was tortured mercilessly by Romkowski, who was later arrested for human rights violations. He was seen with two broken collarbones and his hands hanging limply by his sides at his show trial on March 3rd, 1948. He told his wife “I cannot live. They killed me [...] compared to them Auschwitz was just a trifle” which gives an indication of their barbarism. Pilecki was sentenced to death and shot in the back of the head on May 25th, 1948. True to his beliefs even in his final moments, Pilecki’s last words were “Long Live Free Poland!”.

For decades Soviet censorship suppressed his story, partly because they couldn’t describe his anti-Nazi actions without also explaining his anti-communist activities, and his children were taught that their father was a traitor. Pilecki and others sentenced in the trial were cleared in September 1990. Soon after, he began to gain some recognition for his sacrifices: he was awarded the Order of Polonia Restituta in 1995, received the highest Polish decoration the Order of the White Eagle in 2006 and, in 2013, was promoted to Colonel by the Minister of National Defence.

The first publication of Witold’s Report took place in 2000, 55 years after the war. Despite the inconceivable evils of the Holocaust, we must remember it is far from fiction. On January 6th, 2021, at the US Capitol riot, Robert Packer was photographed wearing a t-shirt emblazoned “Camp Auschwitz” with “Work Brings Freedom” beneath a skull. The nature of the Holocaust is so terrible that its message about man’s inhumanity is hard to comprehend, and just 76 years later it has become diluted enough that such a disgusting display is possible. We have seen a rise in far-right nationalist rhetoric and politics cross-culturally over the last decade, and it is down to each of us individually to resist the repetitions of history that threaten us and to educate others about the ideological horrors of the last century: the Holocaust, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Gulags, Pol Pot’s Kampuchea, the Maoist Cultural Revolution and more recently the Uighur re-education camps. As those who outlived what was designed to destroy them are few, we, the next generation, must endeavour to keep such events alive in the present.

It is important to stress the depravity of the Nazis and to recognise the evil that allowed the hells of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chelmno, where only three Jews survived, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Majdanek. This is encapsulated in the cruel, ironic “joke” of “Arbeit Macht Frei” which Jordan Peterson called “poetic in its malevolence”. There is a

danger that we section the Nazis off as an anomaly rather than addressing their true nature. Nazis were humans like us; they had families, wives, children; they themselves were children once. We must understand that within us is the ability to be a Nazi. Statistically, we would not be a saviour of the Jews but a Nazi. Within all of us is a deep capacity for evil and we must understand that in order to be able to control it.

Equally it is paramount that we understand that Witold Pilecki was a normal man who, through force of will, endured unimaginable suffering to aid those who could not fight for themselves. Pilecki bravely helped those he believed to be deserving with the strength of character to stand up to both the communist and fascist regimes of the 20th century, sacrificing his family and himself in the pursuit of truth and freedom.

In all of us is the ability to be the Pilecki of our time, to stand steadfast against those who would spread hatred and fear. The past was once a present; the death camps were once a rumour. We must recognise the failings and the evil within our own societies today so that the future may remain peaceful.

Michael Schudrich said, “when God created the human being, God had in mind that we should all be like Captain Witold Pilecki”. He manifested the axiomatic ideals of Christianity, Judaism and Islam; suffering and sacrifice in the pursuit of good for all.

We must remember Pilecki and the 7,000 Poles recognized as Righteous Amongst The Nations by Yad Vashem; all were beacons of light in the darkest of times.

T h a t i s w h y h e w r o t e

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Please note that this essay should not be regarded as a “model essay” or example to be imitated. The Foundation welcomes essays written in different styles.