

Book Review

The Volunteer: The True Story of the Resistance Hero who Infiltrated Auschwitz
by Jack Fairweather, WH Allen, 2019.

Review by Nick Fox OBE, Deputy Col Comdt

At the outbreak of World War II, Witold Pilecki was a gentleman farmer and junior officer in a reserve cavalry unit of the Polish Army. At the end of September 1939 Poland was a defeated nation, occupied by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union; Pilecki joined the Polish underground.

In November, he helped to form the *Tajna Armia Polska* (Secret Polish Army) acting as its chief recruiter. The SS started mass arrests of Poles and by January 1940, 150,000 had been deported; the leader of one resistance group began documenting these Nazi crimes and smuggling details to the Polish government in exile, in the hope these would stiffen the resolve of British and French allies in Poland's favour. Initial reports mentioned a camp in Poland which mirrored the 'protective custody' regime of those in Germany; this was a former Polish Army cavalry barracks at Oswiecim, the name of which, in German, would later become synonymous with mass murder: Auschwitz. It was thought that as long as this camp remained unknown, the Germans were free to do anything they liked there and so a search was started for someone to infiltrate it. Pilecki's name was put forward; the task was to infiltrate the camp, collect intelligence about it, create a resistance cell and stage a breakout.

Given the risks, Pilecki could not be ordered to undertake the mission, he would have to volunteer. Despite the need to abandon his family and run the risks of being unmasked as a former Polish officer and resistance leader, he stepped forward. Placing himself in a location which the Secret Army knew was to be raided, he allowed himself to be arrested and on 21 September 1940 arrived in Auschwitz as a prisoner. The book documents, in incredible detail, his arrival and brutal initiation, underlined by the warning from a senior German official: 'Let none of you imagine that he will ever leave this place alive.' Despite the significant risks of betrayal, which could be motivated by just the promise of an extra crust of bread, he began recruiting among the ranks of prisoners, singling out former soldiers, friends and relatives. He slowly built an effective network inside the camp and eventually established links to the local community. He now had the means to collect intelligence and disseminate it.

The Volunteer goes on to describe how Pilecki, over the next two and a half years, recorded the development of Auschwitz from a punishment and work camp for 'enemies of the state', into a pivotal part of the Nazi extermination programme, forged at the Wannsee Conference of January 1942. He documented in detail the suffering and fate of thousands of Russian POWs; experiments in eliminating sick prisoners; the arrival of French Jews; the trials of gas for mass murder and, in November 1941, the start of the camp's 'annexe' at nearby Birkenau. The author cleverly tracks Pilecki's activities in the camp alongside the war's progress, with the reader becoming increasingly conscious that, despite Pilecki's unwavering focus on his mission, his various reports were failing to have the impact that was hoped for.

Pilecki's courage and determination shine through the book like a beacon. His mission cost many members of his network their lives; in the face of almost unbelievable hardship and suffering, the daily risk of exposure and nearly dying himself from typhus, Pilecki continued

to build his network even advocating, in one report, Allied bombing of the camp to prevent further cruelty.

The book is remarkably well researched, drawing on Pilecki's painstakingly detailed reports which survived the war. Attempts by Polish historians in the 1960s to tell Pilecki's story, were confounded by his use of code and it was not until the 1990s that his unpublished memoir and a further report, which revealed the key, came to light. The author spent five years pulling these together, supported by the testimony of family and a surprising number of witnesses who knew Pilecki, with collateral drawn from an impressive number of international archives, not least the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. The result is a book which reads like a thriller, with pace and suspense to the extent that readers might often find themselves having to pause and remember this all actually happened, exactly as described. The book holds little back and the descriptions of human suffering, and the Nazi officials' indifference to it, are not for the faint-hearted.

Pilecki's personal reaction to it is described in his own hand: his concerns for his co-conspirators; his helplessness at their fate; and his shame for becoming 'emotionally distant' from the suffering of others. It was this factor, plus his frustration at the apparent lack of Allied response, that caused him to plan his own escape in April 1943, during which he was shot but survived. The last third of the book charts his survival in the Polish underground (during which he diligently rewrote all his intelligence reports), his part in the Warsaw Uprising, survival in a Bavarian POW camp until liberation in 1945 and his return to Poland – now under Soviet domination – to create another intelligence network. It was this that led to his arrest in May 1947 and his torture and execution in 1948 at the hands of his own (now communist) countrymen, following a show trial which portrayed him as a traitor. Ironically, his wartime heroism was erased from Polish history and only surfaced after the communist collapse of 1989.

For the reader who is concerned with the evidence, the detail of which, at many points, is almost too difficult to believe, the author has meticulously included details of all his sources and references. The book contains useful maps and diagrams which help contextualise Pilecki's story and is well illustrated, with post-war sketches and drawings provided by former inmates which bring to life the verbal descriptions of the camp's horrific routines. These are augmented by contemporary camp photographs of prisoners. The shaven heads and striped uniforms, presented triptych-like, portray the Nazi attempts to strip prisoners of their dignity; simultaneously, however, they allow the face to be put to the name, whether they are Pilecki's comrades or the dreaded *Kapos* (camp police drawn from the ranks of the prisoners).

The book appeals on several levels. It describes, with almost forensic detail, daily life – and death – in the camp; the work of the Polish underground, both inside and outside of Poland; the attempts by the Poles in exile to influence the Allies' response; and the wider strategic events that shaped that response, such as it was.

Intelligencers reading the book will appreciate the human intelligence process and the huge risks involved; the difficulties of collecting and recording data; the search for and trust placed in couriers who could disseminate the product; the frustration of the absence of a response from 'higher command'; and the apparent lack of exploitation of accurate intelligence. That aside, the book is also an inspiring account of a soldier and leader, who, in the direst of circumstances, focussed steadfastly on his intelligence mission, whatever the personal cost. The traditional

epithets of ‘courage’, ‘determination’ and ‘endurance’ hardly seem adequate, especially when one is reminded that Witold Pilecki was ‘a volunteer’.

If any satisfaction, on a local level, is to be derived from these tragic events it is perhaps the fact that Auschwitz’s commandant, Rudolf Höss, was located, arrested and questioned by members of the Intelligence Corps, as a result of which he confessed to his awful crimes and was tried in Poland for murder.

Jack Fairweather’s book was the deserved winner of the Costa Book of the Year in 2019. It is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand how Auschwitz (and Birkenau) evolved and operated on a daily basis. It should also be mandatory reading for all students to better understand how dictatorships and extremism – of any hue – inevitably restrict human freedom and create suffering to gain and retain control. *The Volunteer* is highly recommended as both a record and a warning.

