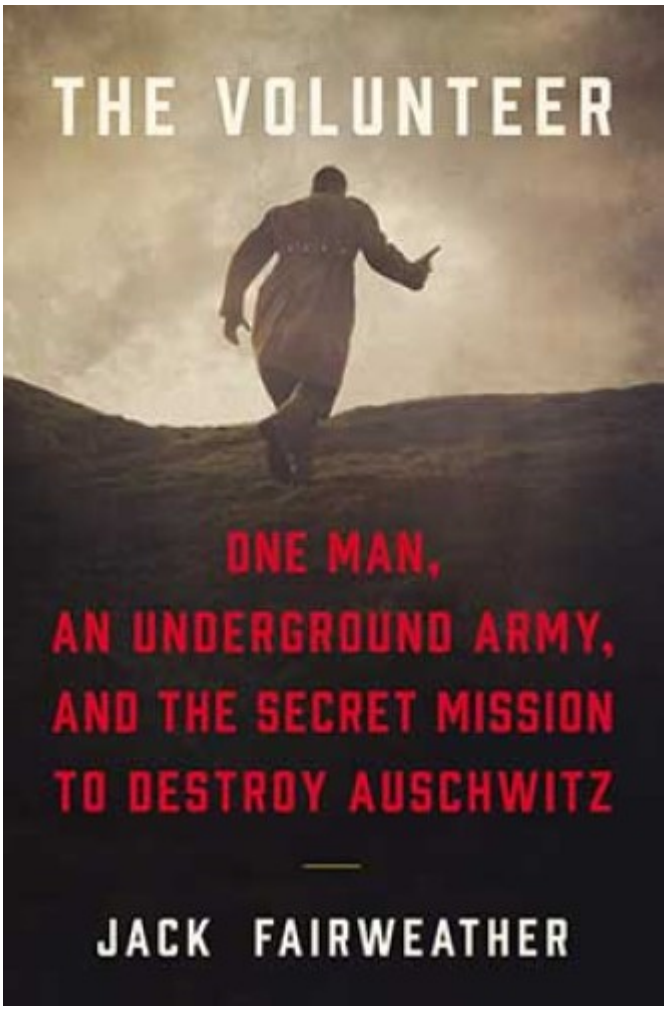
The man who volunteered to be imprisoned at Auschwitz

In the face of evil, we tend to keep our heads down. Not Witold Pilecki.

by Sally Dyck in the November 6, 2019 issue

In Review



The Volunteer

One Man, an Underground Army, and the Secret Mission to Destroy Auschwitz

By Jack Fairweather
HarperCollins

He *volunteered* to go to Auschwitz. Witold Pilecki was a Polish cavalry reserve officer prior to World War II when he began to recognize that Hitler's plan for Poland was to destroy not only the Jews but also the ethnic Poles, whom Hitler regarded as a "weaker Slavic race." In the fall of 1939, after Germany invaded Poland, many Poles were being rounded up. Those who were educated or members of the professional class were killed. Others were sent to labor camps.

In response, Pilecki and Jan Włodarkiewicz created the Secret Polish Army. They agreed that Włodarkiewicz would lead and Pilecki would be the chief recruiter. Recruitment was risky because survival depended upon trusting the potential recruits.

The organization struggled from the start with personality conflicts and strategic differences. One disagreement in particular led to the situation in which Pilecki volunteered to go to Auschwitz. Włodarkiewicz, who wanted to make Poland a Catholic nation, began employing anti-Semitic rhetoric. Pilecki rejected this move and persuaded other leaders in the resistance to bypass Włodarkiewicz's leadership. The new leader, Colonel Stefan Rowecki, was from a rival resistance group, and he strongly believed that the Allies needed to see a vivid picture of the conditions in Auschwitz before they could be convinced to intervene. Włodarkiewicz knew that Rowecki wanted someone to infiltrate the camp, and he took it upon himself to "invite" Pilecki to be the "honored" one. In some ways Pilecki had no choice: someone had to do it and he had supported Rowecki's leadership. Still, to volunteer for Auschwitz was a courageous move.

Late in 1939, Pilecki allowed himself to be rounded up by the Germans and taken to Auschwitz, which was being used to house Polish political prisoners. His mission was twofold: to get information to the Allies and to form an internal Polish resistance.

The odds were stacked solidly against him. Organizing a resistance group within the camp was difficult, given the constantly changing population. Some prisoners were released, others died, and others were killed. New prisoners were constantly coming in. There was the danger that recruits might inform on the resistance, especially under torture. Documenting the Nazi crimes in writing was risky, and smuggling records out of the camp was even more dangerous.

Pilecki knew that he could be killed in the blink of an eye for any or no reason. Even worse was the possibility that he would languish in captivity without being able to do anything to help free Poland from German control. While fully dedicating himself to this impossible mission for over two years, he began to believe that the best thing would be for him to escape.

This isn't a "happily ever after" story: life rarely was for anyone in wartime Poland. After a harrowing escape from Auschwitz in 1943, Pilecki made his way to Warsaw. He participated in the Warsaw Uprising from August 1944 until its defeat by the Germans in October of that year. He then became the inmate of yet another German prison camp.

Pilecki was liberated by American troops in 1945 but found his beloved Poland threatened now by the Soviets. He worked in the Polish resistance against the Soviets until he was arrested in May 1947. Torture and imprisonment were followed by a show trial in March 1948, in which he was sentenced to death.

Pilecki was shot to death on May 25, 1948. His story didn't come to light until the 1960s, and he wasn't fully celebrated as a Polish war hero until the fall of communism in 1989.

The Volunteer is a study in the kind of courage it takes to resist injustice. In the face of evil, our common response is to keep our heads down and our arms folded in denial or resignation. Pilecki's ability to do otherwise underscores Viktor Frankl's argument that in order to endure a catastrophe like the Nazi labor camps, one has to have a strong sense of purpose. Pilecki's purpose—to organize the resistance, to seek the Allies' support, and to free Poland from occupation—was always greater than himself. It's worth asking: Are our "purpose statements" as generous?

Pilecki's accomplishments were built on his trust in his recruits within the resistance. Trust was in short supply in the camps, along with food. There was a constant and overwhelming threat of starvation, disease, and death. Because he trusted his recruits amid such dire circumstances, he inspired trust in return. Resistance requires putting ourselves in each other's hands.

Shortly after this book was released, I embarked on a Jewish-Christian pilgrimage to Poland. While I've read quite a few authors on the Holocaust—including Frankl, Anne Frank, and Elie Wiesel—I didn't know much about the role of ethnic Poles in World War II. Nothing compares to standing on the ground at Auschwitz. For those who

can’t travel there, Pilecki’s story provides a glimpse of what was at stake.

When visiting the death camps, you ask yourself, “Could I torture and kill as the guards did? Am I capable of that?” In contrast, when reading the story of Pilecki, you’re prompted to ask, “Could I do what he did, risking everything for the sake of others? Would I have volunteered for that?”