

# Noble Intentions, Imperfect Execution. Comments on the Publication *A Captain's Portrait: Witold Pilecki – Martyr for Truth* by Adam J. Koch

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Presenting works of popular scholarship – written in English but from a Polish perspective and intended for foreign audiences – about outstanding figures from Polish history is undoubtedly an excellent means of disseminating knowledge about the complex and often tragic fate of Poles. With some simplification, such works may be classified within the sphere of public diplomacy (Snow & Taylor, 2009), thus avoiding the more specific yet also more controversial term “historical policy” (Ponczek, 2013, pp. 7–22).

It is within this necessary and valuable current that we may situate the book by Adam J. Koch, a Polish-born economist who settled in Australia in the late 1980s. The publication is devoted to the famous Captain Witold Pilecki, one of the most fascinating and, at the same time, perhaps the most tragic heroes of twentieth-century Poland (Cyra, 2014; Konik, 2013; Pawłowicz, 2008; Wysocki, 2012). The starting point, therefore, must be regarded as highly promising. Nevertheless, I must note that Adam J. Koch’s undertaking is not free from certain shortcomings.

I do not consider it a flaw that the author is not, by training, a historian, political scientist, or journalist. Nor should the existence of earlier English-language works of popular scholarship devoted to Captain Pilecki (not to mention numerous online materials) have any significant bearing on the assessment of this publication. In fact, English translations of the reports by the “volunteer to Auschwitz” appeared in 2012 (Pilecki, 2012) and 2017, of which the latter is currently available free of charge in electronic form (Pilecki, 2017). In 2023, a bilingual album entitled *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki 1901–1948/Rotmaster Witold Pilecki 1901–1948* was published (Pawłowicz, 2023), while Pilecki was already present in the English-language publishing market in the mid-1970s (Garliński, 1975). In the case of such works, one should not speak of competition; the more there are, the better. Originality is therefore not the primary criterion of evaluation.

In this instance, greater doubts arise concerning the book’s structure and conceptual design, both of which are closely interconnected.

The reader gains the impression that the underlying difficulties stem from the author's uncertainty as to whether he was writing a popular or an academic work. As far as language is concerned, the matter is clear: the book reads well and can be placed within the Anglo-Saxon school of historical narrative. The inclusion of a limited number of endnotes is likewise a common feature of lighter, semi-popular studies. Yet Koch, while clearly leaning toward popularization, does not refrain from running a parallel narrative in some extended notes, multiplying factual details, and, moreover, inserting in the middle of the book a full-text edition of Pilecki's report from 1943.

Given the availability online of an almost identical edition published one year earlier, the inclusion of that edition could easily have been omitted. A less than ideal but still preferable solution would have been to place it in an appendix. As it stands, it occupies roughly ninety pages embedded in the middle of the main text – complete with footnotes and an editorial note – disrupting the chronologically arranged narrative between the account of Pilecki's escape from Auschwitz and the summary of his activities with the Home Army's "Kedyw" unit. This arrangement is opaque and counterintuitive, conflating two distinct registers: a popular-historical narrative and a scholarly document edition. Furthermore, the edition of the report is not properly delineated as one of the chapters (or rather sections, since the word "chapter" does not appear in the titles) of the second part.

At this point, attention should also be drawn to the imperfect organization of the book's content. The work consists of two parts (each divided into unnumbered sections and subsections). The first provides an extensive historical introduction, while the second contains the entire biography of the protagonist, further interrupted by the inserted source material. It would have been advisable to subdivide this crucial section into smaller, more clearly defined units.

Serious doubts arise concerning the concept of the extensive, more than sixty-page historical introduction. I understand the author's intention to present readers with the basic facts of Polish history, and in particular to reflect on the traditions that shaped Pilecki's character (see pp. 30–38). This is an excellent and well-justified idea. However, I find it entirely unnecessary to recount the history of the Polish state and nation *ab ovo* from the baptism of Poland, through wars with the Teutonic Order, to discussions of the *liberum veto* and breaking the Ottoman siege of Vienna. A few sentences on these matters would suffice, perhaps with a somewhat (but only somewhat) more detailed treatment of the events of the long nineteenth century – but certainly not a condensed "history of Poland in a nutshell" extending over several dozen pages. A reader interested in the book's central figure is unlikely to wish to ponder the motivations of Mieszko I or to need to learn the name of the papal legate Pietro Vidoni, in whose presence King John II Casimir made the Lwów Oath in 1656.

Condensing this section and omitting the full source edition would also help to lighten the volume, which currently runs to over four hundred pages, a considerable length for a work intended to be popular in character.

Reducing its bulk would in turn decrease the excessive level of detail not only in the historical overview but also in the description of the period in which the protagonist lived. The density of factual narration is something of a drawback in a work aimed at a general audience. At times, the author shows an excessive tendency to cite numerous peripheral or tangential details surrounding Pilecki, some of which are more relevant than others. Neither does the author refrain from multiplying names of persons, places, and organizations (often accompanied by code-names or pseudonyms). Such accumulations may at times tire or confuse readers unfamiliar with Polish history. A slightly more rigorous selection of material would have benefited the work.

Among the minor yet somewhat bothersome flaws, two deserve mention. First, the absence of a list of abbreviations hinders smooth reading (a list of illustrations would also have been useful). This omission is all the more noticeable since the bibliography includes abbreviations of archival collections, none of which are expanded anywhere in the volume. As a result, the perplexed reader will not know what the mysterious “CAW”, “AUOP”, “APMA-B,” or “APMO” stand for. Second, the bibliography lacks the fundamental division into sources and secondary works, which is an editorial oversight. Moreover, the sentence appended at the end of the bibliography, in which the author states that the Institute of National Remembrance provided him with various unpublished archival materials concerning Witold Pilecki, remains unclear. This reveals little: what kind of materials were these, and how were they used in the text?

Despite the shortcomings mentioned above, Adam J. Koch’s book has undeniable merits. Chief among them is the narrative style already noted. Although the author sometimes overwhelms the reader with detail, he is generally aware that he is writing for a non-Polish audience unfamiliar with the intricacies of Polish realities. He therefore explains terms, clarifies circumstances, and strives to make himself understood. Importantly, he is at times able to draw the reader in, to engage them in the world he describes, and above all, in the fate of his protagonist.

Although Koch clearly wishes to highlight the exceptional nature of Captain Pilecki, it must be stressed that he does not lapse into excessive exaltation or hagiographic overtones (save for a few minor exceptions). He seeks to portray Pilecki as an extraordinary yet flesh-and-blood man, subject to doubts, dilemmas, and joys. In a scholarly biography, one might expect a more nuanced and less unequivocal portrait, but within the conventions of a popular work such one-sidedness is not particularly jarring. For the same reason, the fact that the book is not ground-breaking

and does not introduce entirely new elements to our understanding of the Captain should not be judged too harshly.

Taking all this into account, and returning to the broader context outlined at the beginning, within which Koch's work should be situated, one can only express (moderate) satisfaction that this book has been published. The author's engagement and enthusiasm deserve recognition. It can only be hoped that the work will attract sufficient interest to warrant a second edition, in which the enumerated shortcomings might be addressed.

Patryk Pleskot

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5627-8325

Institute of National Remembrance

University of Rzeszów

(transl. by Ian Stephenson)

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