Few people in the West have ever heard about the heroism of Witold Pilecki during WWII because his story was suppressed by the postwar communist regime in Poland. My first awareness of Pilecki’s bravery came when I read of four stamps and a Pilecki postcard issued by the Polish post commemorating the lives of surviving prisoners of Nazi concentration camps:

Witold Pilecki (1901-1948)
Władysław Wolski (1910-2008)
Ignacy Ludwik Jez (1914-2007)
and
Stanisława Maria Sawicka (1895-1982)

Witold Pilecki was in the Polish army in 1939 when Germany invaded western Poland at the outbreak of WWII, followed by the Soviet Union’s attacking Poland from the east. Poland was soon defeated by the combined superior forces of Germany and the Soviet Union. In November 1939, Pilecki and his commander, Major Jan Włodarkiewicz, organized one of the first resistance groups, the Secret Police Army (TAP).

Pilecki experienced extremely harsh conditions in Auschwitz, including a bout with typhus. He soon learned that the wrong answer to a question could be fatal. (Pilecki translated by Garlinski, 2012):

They killed whoever was at hand. The first thing was a question thrown out in German by a striped man with a club: “Was bist du von zivil?” [“Hey you, what’s your civilian job?”] Replying priest, judge, lawyer, at that time meant being beaten to death.

Pilecki’s report included the not very welcoming words of Fritz Seidler, the Acting Deputy Camp Commandant:

Let none of you imagine that he will ever leave this place alive…. It has been worked out that you will survive for six weeks; anyone who lives longer… must be stealing, and anyone who is stealing, will be sent to the Penal Company, where you won’t live very long.

While in the camp, Pilecki informed the Allies of the Nazi atrocities in Auschwitz as early as 1941. In what then became known as the Witold Report, prepared after Pilecki’s escape from Auschwitz in 1943, he documents what he witnessed including:

“murder by gassing of Soviet prisoners of war,” “building of two new crematoria with electrical ovens to increase the efficiency of burning” and “bodies that have been gassed.”

He also discovered a devious scheme to fool relatives of Jews who were temporarily given work with good conditions:

“After a few months of writing letters about the good conditions which they were enjoying, the Jews were
suddenly rounded up from their jobs and ‘quickly finished off.’”

The Office of Strategic Services in London, which received the report, filed it away with a note stating that there was no indication as to its reliability (Hilberg, 2003). Witold’s Report was one of three independent reports, known jointly as the Auschwitz Protocols, which warned about the mass murders that were taking place inside the camp. It is inconceivable that the Allies ignored such corroborating evidence from three independent eyewitness reports. This in itself was a crime. The least the Allies could have done was to bomb the rail lines.

When the Warsaw Uprising occurred on Aug. 1, 1944, now Captain Pilecki fought bravely against the overwhelming military power of Germany’s superior armaments. He was captured and spent the rest of the war in German prisoner of war camps.

When the war ended, Pilecki accepted an undercover mission to gain intelligence information for the Polish government-in-exile about the newly established communist regime. He was arrested by the communist government on May 8, 1947. Prior to his trial, he was repeatedly tortured. On March 3, 1948, a show trial took place and he was sentenced to death; the execution was held on May 25, 1948. So much for Soviet justice that was prevalent in communist-controlled Eastern Europe.

Captain Pilecki and all others convicted in the trial were rehabilitated in 1990, following the ousting of the communist Polish government. Posthumously, Pilecki received the Commander’s Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta (1995) and the Knight of the Order of the White Eagle (2006). Yad Vashem awarded him the title of Righteous among the Nations. Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, gave him the ultimate compliment: “When God created the human being, God had in mind that we should all be like Captain Witold Pilecki, of blessed memory.”

— Gene Eisen

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witold_Pilecki
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witold’s_report

Pilecky, Captain Witold; Jareck Garlinski, trans., 2012. The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery. Aquila Polonica (U.S.) LTD., Los Angeles, CA
Canada Post’s first Hanukkah Postcards

As fewer and fewer people use conventional mail, postal services around the world have been looking for ways to encourage consumers to send letters and use stamps.

The Picture Postage program is Canada’s profitable response to this dilemma. For a number of years, it has been possible to send a well resolved jpeg image, and have it imprinted on adhesive stamps for a premium. In this way, for about double the cost, one could personalize their own stamps for weddings, birthday parties, bar mitzvahs and other important events.

In 2011, Canada Post realized that they could take advantage of their own marketing success, by issuing a Picture Postage series to mark the arrival of Eid, Duvali and Hanukkah. Needless to say, these stamps were very well received.

The Menorah and Dreidel Hanukkah stamps were reprinted several times and both were available this holiday season, with the Menorah issue reported as sold out on the Canada Post website in mid December. The reprinted versions are the same as the 2011 originals and because they are digitally produced on the same preprinted border stock, there was no opportunity for any variations other than perhaps a small colour shift.

On the heels of this success, Canada has now expanded its “Picture Postage” program to include a series of five Hanukkah themed postcard designs.

It is as simple as going to canadapost.ca/hanukkah and following the directions. One can select one of five predesigned 6.7 inch x 4.6 inch Hanukkah postcards, and insert an image into the template provided. The service works equally well on PC as well as Mac and can even be managed through mobile devices via free easily downloadable applications.

The Canada Post site allows you to type in a message and address to any destination. Then for $2.45 they do the rest.

Canada Post will also very economically print Hanukkah cards with many of the same border designs plus a few more not currently available in the postcard format. These are not technically philatelic items as they are inserted into blank envelopes which Canada Post also supplies with the service, with an option to purchase postage paid envelopes.

— Irv Osterer