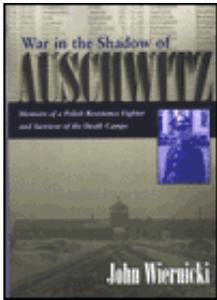

War in the Shadow of Auschwitz: Memoirs of a Polish Resistance Fighter and Survivor of the Death Camps by John Wiernicki (2001), 270 pages



After reading this memoir, one is likely to conclude that it is more than the author's nightmarish experiences. From the distance of half a century, he shares his keen observations of human nature and offers a cogent commentary regarding events of World War II. The actual narrative begins when young John (Janusz) is only 14 years of age in the glorious summer of 1939. He is happy after completing the first year in the Cadet School, in American terms a "military academy" for young boys. The curriculum is on the highschool level, an army career far away, and the regimen was healthy. As usual, John spends his vacations in the Lublin area. At his aunt's lovely estate, he is riding horses, exploring the forest, flirting here and there, meeting friends everywhere. On September 1 this magic world collapses, never to return. It is heartbreaking when the family home disintegrates, especially if it has been tended for many

generations.

In 30 days the Polish campaign ends. John's father, a military man, makes his way via Hungary to France and eventually to England. Janusz remains in the countryside and witnesses Poland's defeat and partition between the Nazis and the Soviet invaders. He gets involved in the rescue of the Jewish girl who lived on the estate, an action that compels him to hide in the nearby forest and join a partisan unit. From here on he stays away from his family, recognizing that it would inevitably suffer if his illegal activities were reported to the local German authorities. Some of John's partisan adventures unfortunately are less than successful. He also notices ideological differences between various underground units. In September 1943, John leaves the Lublin area for a week to visit his grandmother in the Kielce Province. He feels secure by holding two fake ID's, but by sheer bad luck he is unexpectedly detained and arrested at the rail station during his return journey. A frightening investigation ensues, and shortly thereafter a cattle train brings him to Auschwitz together with other detainees. (The American reader learns, perhaps for the first time, that the place was originally set-aside for Poles in the summer of 1940. Only in the subsequent months, particularly from 1942 onwards, did it become an international camp of immense proportions, holding prisoners from all parts of Europe. Soon thereafter it became an outright extermination camp for Jews.)

Probably the most frightening part of this memoir is the description of the "Quarantine Camp" where new arrivals were subjected to a merciless screening. The brutality of the process remains in the reader's mind for a long time. Frequently the sadistic executioners are inmates themselves, devilishly promoted to block seniors or "capos" by their SS guards. Concentration camp life is utterly unpredictable and a matter of pure luck, as well as the physical stamina of the individual. Good luck brings John to the Disinfection Command and then to a hospital. Certainly, John's young age and the acquired talent for survival help him. There are many touching encounters with fellow inmates, men and women; sometimes they stay together for a while, but in many instances fate separates them forever. In early 1944 both Auschwitz and nearby Birkenau camps accept one trainload after another of Hungarian Jews, and the writer has an opportunity to watch how each group is rapidly divided into units heading immediately for the "showers" (i.e. gas chambers) or allowed to work. In the fall of 1944, Auschwitz undergoes radical changes due to German defeats on the Eastern Front. John's group is transferred by train to Buchenwald near Weimar, but his stay there is short. Soon he finds himself in Ohrdruf, Buchenwald's work outlet, otherwise known as the infamous Special Camp III where, in appalling working conditions, the prisoners dig a tunnel intended to house a hidden Nazi communication center. In early April, the Ohrdruf Command closes, and the inmates march back to the main camp. Suddenly, discipline cannot be easily enforced: while some people are still punished, John manages to escape from the marching column and hide in the nearest forest. Within a day or so, General Patton's troops are in total control of the area, and the war comes to an end.

The author's objective evaluation of human behavior under horrible circumstances is impressive. He offers profiles of dozens of individuals from all walks of life. Many of them are abhorrent types: sadists, tormentors, and plain murderers, irrespective of their nationality, and this applies to guards as well as to inmates. Many appear to be psychopaths. Even among physicians in the camps, there are some who show some semblance of compassion while others are plain scoundrels. Wiernicki's account is devoid of any sort of chauvinism. For American readers who have never read about Auschwitz, this book will be a revelation.

The author is an architect who has been a resident of the U.S. for the last 45 years. He dedicates this book to his six grandchildren. An excellent glossary explains many confusing German camp names and SS titles. For readers' convenience, our own Library copy is accompanied by detailed maps of the Lublin and Buchenwald areas, with

the places mentioned in the text properly highlighted.

George E. Suboczewski