



Impact Statement

Oliver Cho, Grade 10

The Ink Remembers, 2026

Acrylic on canvas board, 16 x 20 inches

Studio JHL, Bellevue, WA

Unsung Hero: Witold Pilecki

I was lying on my bed, earbuds in, reading Mark Manson book when I had to stop. Manson brought up this Polish soldier, Witold Pilecki, as an example of what humans are capable of when they actually commit to something. So, when I saw his name on the Unsung Heroes list, I already knew.

What stuck with me wasn't just the bravery, it was that nobody told him to do it. A lot of wartime heroes were put in impossible situations and just handled it, but Pilecki came up with the plan himself. He volunteered to get arrested by Nazis and sent to Auschwitz. In September 1940, he walked into a street roundup in Warsaw, got taken in, and was transported to the camp days later with a false name and a real family he left behind.

Once inside, his job was to build a resistance network among the prisoners and get information back to the Polish underground. Nobody on the outside really knew what Auschwitz was yet, and Pilecki spent the next 947 days changing that, in a place where most prisoners lasted around 42. He was finding people he could trust, passing messages, and getting reports smuggled out to Warsaw and eventually to London. Those reports were some of the first real proof the Allies had of what was happening inside, the gas chambers, the experiments, all of it. They got the reports and nothing changed.

That's the part I keep thinking about. He got the information out and it didn't matter. When he escaped in April 1943 and returned to Warsaw, the commanders he had been working with were gone, and the new leadership had no interest in his plans. He spent three years inside Auschwitz and came back to nothing, but still went and fought in the Warsaw Uprising, got captured again, and after the war wrote everything down, later published as *The Auschwitz Volunteer*. In 1948 the communist government tried him for espionage and shot him. His kids grew up thinking he was a criminal and learned the truth decades later. My painting focuses on Witold's Report, the document he was writing and smuggling out while still a prisoner. The image I kept coming back to was just him somewhere in that camp with a piece of paper, writing down what he saw so it wouldn't get lost. For a lot of those prisoners, his words were the only record that they existed.

The painting shows him at a desk, mid-sentence, pen on the page. The ink strokes start dissolving into the silhouettes of prisoners standing in line behind him, like the figures are climbing out of the paper itself. The line between the writing and the people blurs together on purpose, because in his report, they were the same thing.

His face was the hardest part to get right. I didn't want him to look broken, and I didn't want him to look like some kind of hero poster either, so I went for something quieter. Like someone who has already made their decision and stopped thinking about it. That felt more honest than anything dramatic, because it wasn't one big moment. Every single day he woke up in that place and kept the operation going. I used acrylic on canvas and kept the colors muted, mostly grey and dark tones. The prisoner figures blend into the pen strokes on the page below them, and the light hits his face and hand while everything else falls into shadow around him.

What I'm taking from his story is simple. He kept working when the results weren't showing up and when nobody was listening, and he did that inside a death camp. I think about that a lot. I'm planning to display the painting at school and try to get it shown around Holocaust Remembrance Day in January. He spent years trying to get people to pay attention to something they kept ignoring. The least I can do is the same.