



Witold Pilecki and his mission to KL Auschwitz

Marcin Panecki



Witold Pilecki before the war, photo. public domain

Witold Pilecki is an extraordinary figure. He volunteered to be interned in Auschwitz and was an eye witness to genocide. In late 1940, he sounded the alarm about the mass atrocities being committed by the Germans. Pilecki's reports are among the first testimonies of the nightmare of the Holocaust, alongside the reports of Jan Karski. In his book *Six Faces of Courage*, British historian Michael Richard Daniell Foot named Pilecki one of the bravest soldiers of World War II.

Pilecki was born on 13 May 1901 in north-western Russia, where his grandfather had been exiled for having participated in the January Uprising. Witold fought as a cavalryman in the Battle of Warsaw during the Polish-Soviet War. After the war, he began studying at the Department of Agriculture at the University of Poznań.

Voluntary prisoner

He fought in the 1939 defensive war following the German invasion. After the fall of Poland, he became one of the founders of *Tajna Armia Polska* [TAP, "Secret Polish Army"] whose main aim was to prepare future military formations and organize networks of caches for weapons, documents, and underground publications. When KL Auschwitz was established at the start of the war, nobody really knew what was really going on inside the barbed-wire fence. After two top-ranking members of TAP were interned there, there arose a need to examine the site directly. At the end of August 1940, this dangerous mission was offered to Pilecki. He accepted. The task involved forming an underground organization in the camp, analyzing the possibilities of freeing the prisoners, and sending intelligence regarding the crimes being committed by the SS. On 19 September 1940, Pilecki

allowed himself to be captured during a round-up in the Żoliborz district of Warsaw. Two days later, Witold Pilecki arrived in Auschwitz on a transport carrying a total of 1,705 prisoners. He was given prisoner number 4859.

Pilecki's Fives. Stay at the camp and establishment of the secret network

He created an underground resistance network, Związek Organizacji Wojskowej [ZOW, "Military Organization Union"], the ranks of which operated in a so-called quinary hierarchy. Each group was formed separately for the sake of the safety of the whole and none of the groups possessed any knowledge of the others. Former soldiers and officers of the Polish Army soon began to join. Pilecki gave them the following tasks: bolstering the spirits of their colleagues, passing on information from outside the camp, gathering intelligence on the situation within the camp and smuggling it outside the walls, organizing food and clothing, and, finally, preparing to rise up against the Germans. ZOW infiltrated areas that were under the exclusive command of the camp authorities. As many as three prisoners linked to ZOW were employed in the Aufnahmenkommando of the Political Division where prisoner numbers were issued and where files and prisoner lists were kept. One of the most important places for the underground conspiracy movement was the office of the records department (Erkennungsdienst), where Pilecki ordered his people to steal prisoner photographs, make copies of key German documents and listen to the conversations of the SS officers. One



The Pilecki family before the war, photo. archives of the Pilecki family

of the main units of ZOW was the hospital; the underground movement also infiltrated many of the camp's blocks as functionaries. In March 1942, there were around 500 members of ZOW. When the Germans established Auschwitz II-Birkenau and began the mass extermination of Jews, its ranks were significantly larger. Pilecki ordered the gathering of intelligence on the scale of the genocide in order to inform London via Warsaw. A radio station was set up in the basement of one of the hospital blocks. It continued to function for seven months. Pilecki's accounts from inside the camp were treated very seriously. In May 1941, the Allies were informed of the mass arrests and executions of Poles, the deportations to Auschwitz and other concentration camps, and the violence committed against the Jewish people by the German occupiers. After a long period of preparation, four members of the underground movement escaped the camp in December 1942. Pilecki learned of their subsequent capture

from one of the newly-arrived prisoners. The camp authorities, now aware of the presence of an underground movement, decided to disable any possibility for its future functioning. The Germans murdered several dozen prisoners in January and February 1943, including some of Pilecki's closest associates, with the aim of hurting the underground movement.

Escape from the camp

On the night of 26 April 1943, Pilecki did the seemingly impossible: he escaped the camp along with two companions, Edward Ciesielski and Jan Redzej. He later recalled: "I left in the night, just as I had arrived. I spent nine hundred and forty-seven days and as many nights in that Hell [...]. I left with fewer teeth than when I had arrived, as well as a broken sternum. I paid a very small price for such a long stay in that sanatorium."



Witold Pilecki at KL Auschwitz, photo. public domain

Pilecki's reports

He wrote the first Auschwitz report after his escape; the account totalled 11 pages. The report was handed to the Home Army command. It was translated into English, German, and French and was later supposed to be given to the Western Allies in order to alert the world to the atrocities being committed by the Germans in Auschwitz. At the end of August 1943, Pilecki reported to the Home Army command. He argued ceaselessly for an armed campaign to be undertaken in order to free prisoners in the camp. He remained in contact with his fellow camp inmates and took care of the prisoners' families. He became involved in the underground fight against the Germans outside the camp, joining the Kedyw 3rd Division of the Home Army command of which he became the deputy commander. He was promoted to the rank of cavalry captain. In Warsaw in the autumn of 1943, Pilecki wrote a second, broader account of his time in Auschwitz which he called Raport W. It was supplemented with hand-written reports and accounts from other members of the Polish underground who cooperated with ZOW. Pilecki joined the fighting in the capital after the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising. After the surrender, he was sent to the Lamsdorf (Łambinowice) camp, and then to Murnau. After the American forces liberated the camp, he was assigned to the 2nd Polish Corps under General Władysław Anders, that is the Polish army fighting Germany alongside the Allies. On 11 July 1945, he reported to Italy. It was there that the most comprehensive report on Auschwitz was written. The report, which contains over a hundred pages, is expanded to include the author's personal comments: "Jews from the Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, and other European countries were sent there [...]. They



KL Auschwitz. Entrance gate to the camp with the inscription "Arbeit macht frei", 2011, photo. public domain

transported them like a herd of animals for slaughter [...]. Then women and children went separately, and so did the men, in their hundreds to the barracks that were allegedly bathhouses (they were gas chambers!). The windows were only on the outside – the were false; inside was a wall. The door was closed and sealed and mass murder took place [...]. Meanwhile, hundreds more went to the chambers.”

A difficult return

In December 1945, he returned to Soviet-occupied Poland under a false name, where he joined the independence campaign. The main task of the organization created by Pilecki was to gather intelligence on the current political situation in the country and the brutal process of communising Polish society. Messages were sent to the 2nd Polish Corps in Italy. Pilecki was arrested on 8 May 1947. He was imprisoned in the infamous Mokotów prison in Warsaw and placed in complete isolation. He was physically and mentally tortured for several months on end. The trial of the Pilecki group began on 3 March 1948. On 15 March, he was sentenced to death. During his last conversation with his wife after the trial, he said the famous words: “I can live no longer. [...] They have exhausted me. [In comparison,] Auschwitz was just a game.” The execution was carried out on the evening of 25 May 1948. Pilecki was shot in the back of the head in a tiny cell in the prison basement, leaving behind his wife, a daughter and a son. His remains were probably buried in a mass grave beneath the wall at Powązki cemetery in Warsaw. The search for Pilecki’s remains is still ongoing.

All information about Pilecki was subject to censorship in Communist-ruled Poland. The first publication of the Pilecki report was only possible after the fall of Communism in 1989.



Witold Pilecki in the dock before the District Military Court in Warsaw, 1948, photo. public domain



Detention facility at Rakowiecka Street in Warsaw, photo. Grażyna Rutowska/National Digital Archives