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Witold Pilecki. Confronting the legend of the “volunteer to Auschwitz”

Death had many opportunities to prematurely end the life of Witold Pilecki, who participated in the fight for independence during the war against the Bolsheviks and fought in World War II. Despite the risk he took, he managed to avoid death when he was at the front, when he found himself in the Auschwitz concentration camp and when he took part in the Warsaw Uprising. That it reached him in seemingly independent Poland and that it happened owing to, among others, his old brothers in arms should be considered a tragic paradox. Pilecki became a victim of the Communist regime, which brought death to him twice. The first death, with a bullet in the back of his head, came on 25 May 1948; the second, symbolic one, involved killing the memory of Pilecki by censoring it for several dozen years.

The memory of Pilecki was liberated and he was rehabilitated only after the fall of the regime that had brought death upon him. In the 1990s, we witnessed the publication of the first biographies of Pilecki, which led to his return to the history of Poland and placed him in the pantheon of Poles who served their homeland to the greatest extent. Moreover, the past several years have shown a growing interest in Pilecki. His figure is now popularised by not only academic publications (which after all reach a rather small audience) but also various kinds of activities undertaken by state institutions, non-governmental organisations as well as football club fans.¹ Among the increasing number of initiatives intended to honour Pilecki was even the idea to make an attempt at his beatification.²

¹ During a match between Śląsk Wrocław and Jagiellonia Białystok that took place on 3 May 2012, the supporters of Śląsk Wrocław prepared a setting including Pilecki's portrait with a caption “Volunteer to Auschwitz” and the quote “Because compared with them Auschwitz was just a trifle”. In 2013, on the 65th anniversary of Pilecki's death, the supporters of Zawisza Bydgoszcz and Widzew Łódź created a similar setting for their clubs' matches, and Legia Warszawa fans organised a rally to commemorate the captain. This way, the figure of Pilecki united the divided supporters' community, and the captain himself became their idol.

² The promoter of the idea and author of letters addressed to Pope Benedict XVI (in 2008) and to Pope Francis (in 2013) with a request to consider Witold Pilecki's beatification is Michał

When accompanied by political or ideological disputes, sometimes the intensification of activities intended to commemorate Pilecki rebounds on broadly understood Polish historical memory. Regardless of the disputes themselves, the consensus over the fact that Pilecki was a national hero is often the only common denominator that unites all political fractions.

In collective consciousness, Witold Pilecki is present mainly as a “volunteer to Auschwitz” and the “author of the first report about the Holocaust”. The definitions were introduced by authors of the first publications on the captain. As they were reproduced and at the same time preserved in subsequent biographies of Pilecki, they have started functioning as synonyms for his name and become an inseparable part of the heroic legend of Pilecki, which contains also traces of idealisation and simplification. How should those two popular expressions be thus treated? I shall try to find an answer to the question by taking a look at the biography of Pilecki in the context of the expressions.

Witold Pilecki, who later became the most famous Captain of the Polish Cavalry, was born on 13 May 1901 in Olonets, North-West Russia, to which his ancestors were deported from the territory of Lithuania as repression for participating in the January Uprising. Witold was one of five children of Julian Pilecki, a forest inspector, and Ludwika Osiecimska. In order to start his education in a Polish school, he and his mother and siblings moved to Vilna in 1910, while his father stayed in Olonets for financial reasons.³ It was in Vilna that he came across secret organisations for the first time when he joined a scout organisation prohibited by the tsar and the secret ‘Sokół’ Association. By the time World War I broke out, he had completed three grades at the junior high school in Vilna and started his holidays in Druskininkai. During the war, he continued his education in Orel upon the River Oka, where he founded the first scout patrol in that area. In October 1918, Pilecki became a student of the Joachim Lelewel Junior High School in Vilna and joined the secret Polish Military Organisation (*Polska Organizacja Wojskowa*, POW).

The atmosphere in Vilna in the period that was crucial for the city and for Poles urged Pilecki to join the Vilna Self-Defence (*Samoobrona Wileńska*), a part of the Polish Army. Later – as a cavalryman – he fought for example in the Battle of Grodno and the Battle of Warsaw and defended Vilna. When the war with the Bolsheviks had ended, he passed his school-leaving examination and continued his military service, due to which he was promoted to reserve second lieutenant in 1926, with seniority from 1923. He settled on his family estate in Sukurcze near Lida (today’s Belarus), dowered by his great-grandmother, Maria née

Tyrpa, Chairman of Paradis Judaeorum Foundation in Kraków. It is an element of a large-scale project entitled “Let’s Reminisce about Witold Pilecki” (*Przypomnijmy o Pileckim*) carried out since 2008.

³ Wiesław Jan Wysocki, *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki 1901–1948* (Warsaw: Światowy Związek Żołnierzy Armii Krajowej i Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2009), pp. 12–14.

Domcyk.⁴ In 1931, he married Maria Ostrowska. One year later, Pilecki celebrated the birth of his firstborn son Andrzej and in 1933 – of his daughter Zofia. He remained active in the military and social sphere. He initiated the establishment of the ‘Krakus’ Military Horsemen Training (*Konne Przysposobienie Wojskowe ‘Krakus’*), composed of military settlers in the Lida County, after which he was appointed the Commander of the 1st Lida Military Training Squadron, placed under the command of the 19th Infantry Division in 1937. As a founder of a farmers’ association and chairman of a dairy he established himself, Pilecki was active also in his local community. In 1938, he received the Silver Cross of Merit for his diverse activities.

During the Polish-German War of 1939, Pilecki as a reserve second lieutenant fought with the 19th Infantry Division of the Prusy Army and then with the 41st Reserve Infantry Division, in which he met Major Jan Włodarkiewicz, the division cavalry commander, and became his second in command.⁵ On September 22, when the 41st Division had been defeated, Pilecki and Major Włodarkiewicz did not follow the order of Commander-in-Chief General Edward Śmigły-Rydz and did not retreat across Romania and Hungary to France. They both stayed in Poland and became active in the underground. In order to organise recruitment to the newly created military organisation, a meeting of underground activists who declared their readiness for cooperation to Major Włodarkiewicz took place on 9 November 1939. On that day, gathered in the flat of Pilecki’s sister-in-law in Warsaw, the participants of the meeting: Major Włodarkiewicz, Second Lieutenant Pilecki, Second Lieutenant Jerzy Maringe, engineer Jerzy Skoczyński and the brothers Jan and Stanisław Dangel decided to form the Secret Polish Army (*Tajna Armia Polska*, TAP).⁶ Major Włodarkiewicz, who became its commander, meant TAP as a military organisation with a clear social and ideological character based on Christian values. The organisation was thus composed mainly of students and regular soldiers coming from Christian

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁵ Marco Patricelli, *Ochotnik. O rotmistrzu Witoldzie Pileckim*, trans. Krzysztof Żaboklicki (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011), pp. 69–70.

⁶ TAP pledged loyalty to the Polish government in exile, but did not accept General Michał Tokarzewski-Karaszewicz (a Mason and theosopher) as a representative of that government. For that reason, the founders of TAP did not join Service for Poland’s Victory (*Służba Zwycięstwu Polski*), the first resistance organisation in occupied Poland. TAP belonged to the Central Committee of Independence Organisations (*Centralny Komitet Organizacji Niepodległościowych*), to the Coordinating Committee of Independence Organisations (*Komitet Porozumiewawczy Organizacji Niepodległościowych*), and – when the latter was dissolved – to the Confederation of the Nation (*Konfederacja Narodu*, KN), which gathered a part of those resistance organisations that did not submit to the Union of Armed Struggle (*Związek Walki Zbrojnej*, ZWZ). The Military Confederation led by Major Włodarkiewicz was created out of KN. As a result of an integration process undertaken by KN in September 1941, TAP members became members of ZWZ. Major Włodarkiewicz became the first Commander of ‘Wachlarz’, a sabotage organisation formed at ZWZ.

circles who possessed moral and professional qualifications defined by TAP regulations.⁷

TAP was supposed to gather intelligence and conduct sabotage as well as social and ideological activities in accordance with such objectives as:

1) Continuing the fight for independence until the final victory by all available means.

2) Developing a program for the Republic that would ensure its moral, political, economic and cultural revival.

3) Providing moral support to society during the occupation and preparing it for the problems that lie ahead.⁸

As part of the intelligence and sabotage activities, TAP members gathered information about the movements of enemy troops and of industrial production for the German army, prepared files on people suspected of collaboration and on *Volksdeutsche* and collected information about the repressive measures used by the occupier. In Warsaw, TAP had its informers in industrial plants and eating places⁹ and among recruited 'blue' policemen who – as far as possible – warned about round-ups, searches and blockades planned by the Germans.

Despite rigorous instructions on keeping people and activities secret and on the functioning of the intelligence units, some TAP members were arrested.

Until August 1940, however, the instances of their unmasking were of an accidental nature and did not result from the organisation being exposed by the Gestapo. The first TAP member to be arrested was Cavalry Captain Janusz Poziomski, the commander of the Kielce Division. He was apprehended, most probably as a result of denunciation, in the middle of February 1940. However, the Gestapo did not connect him with activities for TAP, due to which he was soon conditionally released.¹⁰

⁷ Kazimierz Malinowski, *Tajna Armia Polska-Znak-Konfederacja Zbrojna. Zarys genezy, organizacji i działalności* (Warsaw: PAX, 1986), pp. 25–27.

⁸ Wysocki, *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki...*, pp. 36–39.

⁹ As far as the latter are concerned, the main information centers were located in café Bodega owned by Officer Cadet Andrzej Rutkowski (TAP member) and a casino on Szucha Street opened by the Germans in October 1940 (in place of the old Officers' Mess). In both places, a part of waiters and waitresses collaborated with the TAP intelligence (Malinowski, *Tajna Armia Polska...*, p. 54).

¹⁰ His release was due to the fact that Poziomski was mistakenly connected with the figure of Colonel Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, who was then leading the Kraków-Silesia Division of ZWZ. The Gestapo decided to release Poziomski in exchange for him leading them to Komorowski. The lives of 400 Polish hostages taken by the Gestapo were supposed to be a guarantee of the completion of the task. Poziomski did not reach Komorowski (it is unlikely that he even searched for him) and hid himself in the Warsaw Underground, having joined ZWZ, later renamed Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK). He died on the first day of the Warsaw Uprising (Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, *Armia Podziemna* [Warsaw: Bellona and Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2009], pp. 44–46).

TAP members in Warsaw were arrested in the tide of house arrests, round-ups and manhunts that had been rising since spring 1940. During one of them, which lasted from 27 to 30 April, the following people were arrested at Café Bodega: Reserve Officer Cadet Rutkowski (active in the Śródmieście district in Warsaw), waiters Janusz Rothert and Jerzy Gizowski, Officer Cadet Stanisław Zieliński and Stanisław Karol Dangel, who was on his way to Bodega. Their arrest was a preventive measure related to the forthcoming 3rd May Constitution Day. Unexposed by the Gestapo, they were released several months later.¹¹

Władysław Dering, who was responsible for health service at the General Staff of TAP, was less lucky. He was arrested in July, most probably after denunciation by his niece who collaborated with the occupier.¹² However, he was not connected with TAP, and his stay in the Pawiak prison was related to the intensified restrictions against the intelligentsia. Until August 1940, the members of the intelligentsia arrested in Warsaw were mainly killed in mass executions held as part of the Extraordinary Operation of Pacification (“AB Aktion”).

Transports of prisoners to concentration camps were not organised in that period (with one exception).¹³ When the Germans formally finished the AB Aktion towards the end of July, it is the concentration camps that were supposed to be among the main sites of execution. It involved the establishment of the Auschwitz concentration camp, to which the first Warsaw transport was sent on 14 August 1940.¹⁴ There were two TAP members on the transport: Chief of Staff Engineer Lieutenant Colonel Władysław Surmacki and Doctor Władysław Dering. They were soon joined by Reserve Lieutenant Jerzy de Virion, arrested in Slovakia in early May 1940, when he was trying to go to France. He was put in prison in Nowy Sącz for illegal entry.¹⁵ He ‘landed’ in Auschwitz on 30 August 1940. None of them was recognised and none caused the exposure of particular organisational units with their testimonies.

The next attack against TAP was already planned and was, according to Dr. Zygmunt Śliwicki,¹⁶ connected with the intelligence signal unit being infiltrated

¹¹ Malinowski, *Tajna Armia Polska...*, pp. 87–88.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 88.

¹³ The first transport from Warsaw of around 1500 men (Pawiak prisoners) left on 2 May 1940 to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The deportees were members of the intelligentsia, including priests, politicians, military men and members of underground organisations (Władysław Bartoszewski, *1859 dni Warszawy* [Cracow: Znak, 2008], p. 151).

¹⁴ The transport included 513 Pawiak prisoners and 1153 men, victims of the manhunt of 12 August.

¹⁵ Malinowski, *Tajna Armia Polska...*, p. 87.

¹⁶ He was put in the Pawiak prison on 26 September 1940 and served there as the attending physician at the department of internal diseases until July 1944. See Zygmunt Śliwicki, *Meldunek z Pawiaka* (Warsaw: PWN, 1974).

by the informer Borys (Bogusław) Pilnik.¹⁷ As a result of his activities during the manhunt started on 18 September 1940, the German police arrested several members of the unit, including Reserve Lieutenant Konrad Żelechowski, who did not withstand the brutal questioning and revealed the names of the TAP members he knew (including Śliwicki) and their contact points. The Gestapo continued the manhunt in TAP offices on 19 and 20 September and arrested between ten and twenty people (men and women).¹⁸ Few of them were released after the questioning, some were held prisoners in Pawiak, and the rest were deported to Auschwitz and Ravensbrück concentration camps.

Among 2000 men arrested on 19 September was also Witold Pilecki (codename 'Witold'), who served as an organisational inspector and Chief of Staff in TAP (from 25 November 1939 until May 1940).¹⁹ On that day, the Germans continued the manhunt mainly in those districts that were inhabited by the intelligentsia: Żoliborz, Kolonia Staszica, Kolonia Lubeckiego and Ochota. This is how Ludwik Landau, the chronicler of occupied Warsaw, remembered the events:

[...] The manhunts took place early in the morning, at 5–7 am. They were organised as follows: they surrounded houses and then made a round of all the flats, which required use of much police force [...] All men aged 18–45 were arrested as a result of the searches conducted very carefully in all flats, all toilets, etc. [...]. They also took the chance to check officers' registration certificates. So it seems that the character of the manhunts could be described in the following way: it was catching for labour but, at the same time, searching for politically suspicious people, with one "suspicious" environment in mind, that is the intelligentsia.²⁰

Pilecki was caught in the already-mentioned flat of Eleonora Ostrowska at Wojska Polskiego Street 40a flat 7 in Żoliborz. He often stayed there since November 1939. Even though he was one of many men captured that day, his arrest was to have a completely different context.

After the arrest of two leadership-level TAP members, Doctor Dering and Lieutenant Colonel Surmacki, Major Włodarkiewicz called a staff meeting towards the end of August 1940. According to Kazimierz Malinowski, the then signal chief at the General Staff, this is when the idea was proposed that someone from among TAP leaders should enter Auschwitz "to sound out the possibility of freeing some prisoners (escape, rescue, etc.), to gather material

¹⁷ Borys Pilnik, a former prison guard, was sentenced to death by the Civil Special Court for collaboration and blackmail. The sentence was executed on 25 August 1943.

¹⁸ Malinowski, *Tajna Armia Polska...*, pp. 94–95.

¹⁹ Since August 1940, he was also responsible for the 1st (organizational and mobilization) Branch and for arming the 4th (supply and secret service) Branch.

²⁰ Ludwik Landau, *Kronika lat wojny i okupacji*, vol. 1: *Wrzesień 1939–listopad 1940* (Warsaw: PWN), p. 694.

on maltreatment of political prisoners by the Germans (and to then pass it on to the Polish government in London) and to form an underground organisation inside the camp. Lieutenant Pilecki volunteered to complete the task, and Major Włodarkiewicz accepted him as a candidate.²¹ However, according to Adam Cyra,²² who referred to a report from Pilecki's testimony of 18 June 1948, the task was imposed upon Pilecki by Major Włodarkiewicz: "I would like to explain that *I was urged* [my emphasis – E.C.S.] to take this step by Major Włodarkiewicz Jan, who announced to me that he had mentioned my name to Colonel Rowiecki alias Grot, who was then chief of ZWZ, as the man who would decide to enter a camp and organise underground activities there."²³ The authenticity of the words quoted above could be questioned on the grounds of the specificity of the investigation materials of the Ministry of Public Security, if they were not confirmed in Pilecki's memoirs written down in October 1945 during his stay in Italy. According to that source, Włodarkiewicz had told Witold the following words already in early autumn 1940: "[...] you have been granted an honour, I mentioned your name to Grot as the only officer who would accomplish that."²⁴ As added by Pilecki, "it was about entering *some* [my emphasis – E.C.S.] camp and organising work for Poles who – disorganised – allegedly die there."²⁵ It appears that Pilecki was not, as it has become customary to think, the initiator of penetrating the camp. Therefore it is more accurate to consider the mission of "Witold" to be rather an instance of obedience to his superiors' orders than voluntary sacrifice.

Furthermore, in a report from 1945, Pilecki made an allusion that the reason for which he was dispatched on the mission to enter Auschwitz could be the disagreement between him and Major Włodarkiewicz on the topic of TAP being

²¹ Malinowski, *Tajna Armia Polska...*, pp. 100–101; cf. Józef Garliński, *Oświęcim walczący* (Warsaw: Volumen, 1992), pp. 29–30; Adam Cyra, Wiesław J. Wysocki, *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki* (Warsaw: Volumen, and Oświęcim: Fundacja Pamięci Ofiar Obozu Zagłady Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1997), Garliński's book was published in English under the title *Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp in 1974 – trans.*

²² Adam Cyra, PhD has worked at the Research Centre at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for many years and written many publications (books and articles) about Witold Pilecki. The figure of Pilecki was also the topic of his doctoral dissertation ("Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki [1901–1948]. Życie i działalność na tle epoki"), defended in 1996.

²³ Adam Cyra, *Ochotnik do Auschwitz. Witold Pilecki 1901–1948* (Oświęcim: Chrześcijańskie Stowarzyszenie Rodzin Oświęcimskich, 2000), pp. 60–61. Cf. also Michael Fleming, *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship of the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 26.

Witold Pilecki's mission was mentioned also by his lawyer L. Buszkowski in his letter to President Bolesław Bierut dated 4 May 1948: "He went there of his own free will, by the order given by Grot, to organise military work there" (Wysocki, *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki...*, p. 183).

²⁴ Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau [Archive of Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, later: APMA-B], Wspomnienia [Memoirs], file 179, Witold Pilecki [memoirs from the period between childhood and arrest on 19 September 1940], p. 313.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

subordinated to ZWZ.²⁶ It would suggest that Pilecki could have fallen victim to conflicts inside TAP.²⁷ However, the thesis is hard to prove. One year after Pilecki had been arrested, Włodarkiewicz decided to integrate the organisation into ZWZ. He had collaborated with ZWZ before, from the moment Rowecki had become its commander, but at the same time tried to maintain autonomy. It is not completely clear why TAP was included in ZWZ. Among the reasons for that was perhaps the weakening of the command division of the organisation caused by the fact that leading TAP members were arrested.

What is also curious is the very idea of entering the newly opened Auschwitz camp. Before the camp was established, Poles had been transported mainly to Dachau and Sachsenhausen, and yet no underground organisation had decided to send any of their men to neither of them. Moreover, Auschwitz was not the first concentration camp established on Polish territory. Still, it was the one to be 'dismantled' by the Polish underground by a decision from the beginning of August 1940 (less than two months after the first transport of Polish political prisoners). It could be justified on the grounds of the plan to learn about the situation of Auschwitz prisoners and the lack of knowledge about the conditions in the camp. According to Jan Masłowski, "[...] news about preparations to establish this camp, about bringing building materials, adaptations, etc. was reaching Silesia, Kraków and beyond."²⁸ But the information was scarce and unconfirmed. It did not suggest any extermination character of the camp

²⁶ Witold Pilecki was promoted to lieutenant in autumn 1941, during his stay in Auschwitz. On this occasion, in his report from 1945, he referred to the reasons for his presence in the camp, "Meanwhile, far away in the outside world in Warsaw, I was promoted. For setting up the TAP [*Tajna Armia Polska* – the Secret Polish Army]; for integrating it into KZN [*Konfederacja Zbrojna Narodu* – the Nation's Armed Alliance]; for ignoring my own ambition and, the moment I had seen General Sikorski's authorisation, working towards integrating all formations into the ZWZ [*Związek Walki Zbrojnej* – the Union for Armed Combat], which had been the first cause of my disagreement with 82 [Major Jan Włodarkiewicz – E.C.S.] and, who knows, maybe the reason I was obliged to leave Warsaw" (Witold Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, trans. Jarek Garliński [Los Angeles: Aquila Polonica, 2012], pp. 145–146).

²⁷ Such an opinion is shared by Michael Fleming, a professor of history at the Polish University Abroad. Based on the report from 1945 and the report from Pilecki's interrogation by Eugeniusz Chimczak on 8 May 1947, Fleming made a conclusion that Major Włodarkiewicz gave the mission of Auschwitz infiltration to Pilecki because of the dispute that existed between them over the further lines of action of TAP. When he was in Auschwitz, Pilecki, who sought to remove the ideological character of the organisation and introduce it into the structures of ZWZ-AK, lost his direct influence on TAP-related issues. See Fleming, "Auschwitz" pp. 312–313 (footnote no. 47). In his testimony, Pilecki says, "As a result of the need to undertake organisational work among Poles deported by the Germans to *different camps*, TAP commander Jan Włodarkiewicz suggested me as the officer *designated* [my emphasis – E.C.S.] for that task to Colonel Rowecki, ZWZ commander" (facsimiles of the document in *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki (1901–1948)*, ed. Jacek Pawłowicz [Warsaw: IPN, 2008], pp. 158–159).

²⁸ Jan Masłowski, *Oświęcim. Cmentarz świata* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1995), p. 31.

either. When asked in summer 1940 whether he had heard about a camp in Auschwitz, Władysław Bartoszewski²⁹ said, “No. I think few in Warsaw knew about it. Perhaps families of Pawiak prisoners taken there in August together with people caught during round-ups? I haven’t heard about it, neither has my environment.”³⁰

It remains for us to think that if Pilecki’s superiors had realised the danger he was exposed to when he passed through the camp gate, they would not have decided on his mission. The decision is even more difficult to understand in the light of later events. After all, Lieutenant Colonel Surmacki (no. 2795) and Doctor Dering (no. 1723) had been in Auschwitz since 15 August 1940. Surmacki was sent to the camp construction office (*Baubiuro*), in which he prepared technical plans of the camp, buildings and roads. As a result, he had a chance to work outside of the camp and make contact with the locals. Dering was assigned to a road-building work squad. Due to illness and exhaustion, he was soon in hospital. When he had improved, he became one of its staff. They were both very lucky to work indoors in relatively safe conditions.³¹

Yet, despite their capabilities and experience in underground activity, for no apparent reason TAP leaders did not assign them the mission to organise a resistance movement within the camp. Instead, they decided to give the task to one of the most important members of TAP. This undermined the structure of the organisation, already weakened after the arrests, to an even greater extent. Apart from that, if one considers the importance of the information possessed by Pilecki about the organisation, it was extremely risky to expose him to possible interrogation by the Gestapo, which could end his mission and result in exposure of TAP.

Before the mission began, it was agreed how to enter the camp, how to communicate and what were the main assignments to be completed while inside. During his preparations, Pilecki assumed a new identity using documents issued to Officer Tomasz Serafiński, who had been mistakenly considered dead. According to the plan, Pilecki’s way into Auschwitz was a manhunt that began on 18 September.

It should be mentioned here that there are two different versions of Pilecki’s arrest described in the literature on the subject. Some authors refer to the post-

²⁹ Władysław Bartoszewski was taken to Auschwitz with the so-called second Warsaw transport on 22 September 1940. He stayed in the camp until 8 April 1941.

³⁰ Michał Komar, *Władysław Bartoszewski: skąd Pan jest? Wywiad rzeka* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2006), p. 45.

³¹ In the case of Lieutenant Colonel Surmacki, it was feared that he could be under close surveillance of the Auschwitz political department because of his officer rank and pre-war social activity. Surmacki was indeed released from the camp in March 1942 (most probably after the intervention of E. Fanti, the chairman of the International Federation of Land Surveyors), but soon afterwards he was arrested again. He died in a mass execution in May or July 1942 (Malinowski, *Tajna Armia Polska...*, p. 100).

war testimony of Eleonora Ostrowska, while others use information provided by Pilecki himself in his memoirs recorded in 1945. Of particular importance is the place where 'Witold' was arrested. What is more, by means of interpretation and development of the history described in Ostrowska's testimony and Pilecki's memoirs, both versions concerning the captain's arrest were additionally modified.

One might seemingly have the greatest reservations over the circumstances of his arrest presented by Ostrowska. What is interesting are the reasons for the lack of consistency between Ostrowska's testimony and Pilecki's report, especially including the cause of a completely different description of the course of events. This makes it difficult to determine the degree of credibility and usefulness of Ostrowska's account. In addition to all that, Ostrowska gave several testimonies (the authors who quote them do not, unfortunately, state their dates), which – typically of this kind of source – differ in a few details.³²

Kazimierz Malinowski described the moment Pilecki was arrested on the basis of one of Ostrowska's testimonies in the following way, "When she [Eleonora Ostrowska] opened the door to them, they asked if there were any men in the flat. It could be seen that they would settle for a negative answer too. Meanwhile, Pilecki emerged from the flat to meet them. They checked his documents and, as he did not have a job certificate, arrested him."³³ The message disagrees slightly with the previously quoted description of the manhunt found in Landau's chronicle of September 19, which gives us a completely different picture of events³⁴. From the above description, it appears that in some cases it was not very important for the German functionaries to thoroughly search flats and that the broadly conceived manhunt was carried out superficially.

Adam Cyra and Wiesław Jan Wysocki present a different version of Pilecki's arrest,³⁵

Witold was in my flat early in the morning on 19 September 1940. Caretaker Jan Kiliański, a sworn TAP soldier, came to me and announced that we

³² She gave the testimony about Pilecki's arrest to several people, including Kazimierz Malinowski, Wiesław J. Wysocki and Adam Cyra, who quoted its fragments in their publications. The content of the testimony given to Cyra is available in the Archive of Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (APMA-B, *Wspomnienia*, file 179, Eleonora Ostrowska, pp. 144–158); others are in the hands of the above-mentioned authors only.

³³ Malinowski, *Tajna Armia Polska...*, p. 102.

³⁴ The course of events presented by Landau is confirmed by Władysław Bartoszewski, who fell victim to the manhunt of 19 September himself, "They came for me at dawn, they came to my flat. Shouting, "Aufstehen, mitkommen!" They cordoned off the block of flats at Słowackiego Street 35/43 [in Żoliborz – E.C.S.], where I lived with my parents on the ground floor. They took altogether fourteen men from our house to Auschwitz" (Władysław Bartoszewski, *Mój Auschwitz* [Cracow: Znak, 2010], p. 13).

³⁵ Prof. Wiesław Jan Wysocki, PhD is the author of the first monograph on Witold Pilecki (*Rotmistrz Pilecki*) published in 1994.

were surrounded by uniformed Germans who walked men out of every house and loaded them onto cars. He also told Witold about many ways to avoid the manhunt. Witold rejected the suggestions and did not even want to try to hide in my flat. After a moment, we heard someone knock at the door vigorously. I opened and saw a German soldier. He asked who lived there. I was about to answer when Witold came out of the room. The German did not check his documents. Witold dressed up and, upon leaving, whispered to me, "Inform the right people that I obeyed the order."³⁶

His words mean that Ostrowska had not been acquainted with Pilecki's plans. This in turn explains the fact that her testimonies lack understanding of the reasons for his behaviour during the manhunt, due to which he was arrested as "one of many" and did not arouse any suspicion among the German policemen. Moreover, this lack of knowledge explains why Ostrowska overestimated Pilecki's possibility of avoiding the arrest. After all, how real was the chance of his escape? If the warning of the round-up came already after the building and the whole area had been surrounded by the Germans, such an escape was rather improbable. Due to the likelihood of a house search, it would be probably unsuccessful to hide inside the flat too, and if the Germans found Pilecki hidden there, it could lead to serious consequences for not only him but also Ostrowska. It is unlikely that Pilecki would risk the life of his sister-in-law.

Pilecki himself described the circumstances of his arrest much more vaguely. In a report completed in Nowy Wiśnicz in June 1943, he omitted them completely and wrote, "I undertook the task in Oświęcim, to which I came with Captain Trojnicki ('Fred') with the Warsaw transport on the night of 21–22 September 1940."³⁷ He devoted more space to them in a draft of his future diary written in October in San Giorgio, Italy, "After the first round-up in Warsaw in August 1940 [12 August – E.C.S.] Jan [Major Jan Włodarkiewicz – E.C.S.] told Witold, 'Well, you see, you didn't take such a good chance to enter the camp in an 'innocent' way. You wouldn't have a case, there would be nothing they could accuse you of.' So Witold took the second chance on 19 September 1940."³⁸

It was only in a thorough report on his stay in Auschwitz and the underground activity in the camp that Pilecki decided to give the details of his arrest, "The 19th of September 1940—the second street round-up in Warsaw. There are a few people still alive who saw me go alone at 6:00 a.m. to the corner of Aleja Wojska and Felińskiego Street and join the 'fives' of captured men drawn up by the SS. On Plac Wilsona we were then loaded onto trucks and taken to the Light Horse Guards Barracks."³⁹

³⁶ Cyra, Wysocki, *Rotmistrz...*, pp. 54–56.

³⁷ APMA-B, *Wspomnienia*, vol. 130, Witold Pilecki (report of June 1943), p. 110.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, file 179, Witold Pilecki [memoirs from the period between childhood and arrest on 19 September 1940], p. 313.

³⁹ Pilecki, *Volunteer to Auschwitz...*, p. 11.

The first historian who made reference to the report was Józef Garliński,⁴⁰ the author of *Fighting Auschwitz* published in London in 1974. Already in the introduction, Garliński emphasised,

I could base a considerable part of my thesis on a completely unique testimony found in the Polish Underground Movement Study Trust in London. It was written in 1946 [the correct date is 1945 – E.C.S.] by Witold Pilecki, who established the underground movement in Auschwitz and who volunteered to go there in order to build a secret military organisation. As I have vetted the author many times, including his past and his ideological attitude, I may conclude that his testimony is truly honest and that the facts described in it were accurately presented. Still, I have checked it many times and compared it with different sources.⁴¹

For that reason, Garliński in his book reconstructed the course of Pilecki's arrest precisely on the basis of the captain's memoirs. Due to the popularity of Garliński's work, the version that Pilecki volunteered to join the group of men arrested during the round-up in Żoliborz became well established. With the passing of time, it took the form of a legend with new "facts" added.

The best example of that process may be found in the description of Pilecki's arrest provided by Marco Patricelli. It appears from his version that, despite people shouting and warning each other about the round-up, Pilecki intentionally walked right into its middle. "Throaty voices of shouting soldiers force him to stop, guns pointed at him show this is no time for discussions. The man raises his arms and is pushed in between people standing with their hands folded on their necks."⁴²

A yet different version of events is found in the post-war memoirs of Wincenty Gawron, who shared his camp pallet with Pilecki for several weeks. Due to their acquaintance and Gawron's involvement in the resistance movement in the camp, Pilecki was to give him the real story behind his way into Auschwitz, "On 19 September, I was in Żoliborz when someone suddenly shouted: round-up! In a sense of self-preservation, my first impulse was to jump into the cellar of the nearest tenement and hide. After a moment of thought, I decided to go there and turn myself in to the gendarmes."⁴³

⁴⁰ During World War II, Józef Garliński took part in the Polish-German War of 1939 and then belonged to ZWZ-AK, in which he was in charge of the prison intelligence service. After his arrest in April 1943, he was transported to Auschwitz. He was liberated in one of the subsidiary camps of the Neuengamme camp. When the war had ended, he stayed in London. Here, in 1973, he was awarded an academic doctoral degree for his thesis on the underground movement in Auschwitz.

⁴¹ Garliński, *Oświęcim...*, p. 10.

⁴² Patricelli, *Ochotnik...*, p. 87; cf. *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki (1901–1948)*, p. 22.

⁴³ Wincenty Gawron, *Ochotnik do Oświęcimia* (Cracow: Calvarianum, and Oświęcim: Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum, 1992), p. 114. Gawron's memoirs were published only after his death. The editor's preface emphasized that the publication was a part of a diary kept

As may be seen, most of the versions I have mentioned are consistent with the circumstances of Pilecki's arrest described by the captain himself. Their authors considered his account to be a fully reliable source, especially as they had no reason to question his truthfulness. Meanwhile, for reasons known only to himself, Pilecki decided to resort to confabulation in the description of his arrest.⁴⁴ This was mentioned by Ostrowska in one of her testimonies. She noticed that "in his previous descriptions, Witold did not reveal my address, from where he was taken, for conspiracy reasons."⁴⁵ This is where the most important issue is reached. Although Ostrowska's testimony provoked the most questions, it is precisely she that presented the true version of events of 19 September 1940, consistent with the course of events presented by Pilecki in his memoirs written down in 1945 and the content of the report of his testimony of 1947. Ostrowska's version is also confirmed by her son Andrzej.⁴⁶ By contrast, there is no evidence or witnesses to confirm that Pilecki joined the arrested men.

Regardless of the discrepancies concerning the place and circumstances of his arrest, all versions have one common element, and on the basis of this element historians (and not only them) decided that Pilecki let Germans capture him with the purpose of reaching Auschwitz. As a result of later interpretations and simplifications, it has been commonly assumed that Pilecki was a "volunteer to Auschwitz".

It is difficult to determine the author of this expression. In 1976, it appeared in the title of the French edition of Garliński's book (*Volontaire pour Auschwitz: La Résistance organisée à l'intérieur du camp*). In Poland, the definition was popularised by Wincenty Gawron, who entitled his memoirs from the camp (in a large measure devoted also to Pilecki) *Volunteer to Auschwitz*. It was soon borrowed by Pilecki's biographers. The neat and meaningful expression has thus become established due to the publications of Adam Cyra (*Volunteer to Auschwitz*, 2000) and Marco Patricelli (*Il Volontario*, Rome 2010) and *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery* (2012).⁴⁷ It resulted from the tendency to present people and events in a simplified way, from insufficient source criticism or its complete absence and from failure to notice contradictions in factual

by Gawron during the occupation and several years after the war. The chapter devoted to his memoirs from Auschwitz was entitled "Volunteer to Auschwitz".

⁴⁴ Wysocki, *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki...*, p. 44.

⁴⁵ APMA-B, Wspomnienia, file 179, Eleonora Ostrowska, p. 148.

⁴⁶ Archiwum Historii Mówionej Ośrodka Karta [Oral History Archive of Ośrodek KARTA], Testimony of Andrzej Ostrowski.

⁴⁷ In an album published by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, IPN), we find the following description: "With the knowledge of ZWZ-AK Commander-in-Chief [...], Witold Pilecki volunteered for that mission [of intelligence gathering in the camp] and - as Tomasz Serafiński - allowed himself to be arrested on 19 September 1940 during a round-up in Żoliborz, Warsaw. (*Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki [1901-1948]*, p. 22).

documents. As a consequence, in the case of the “volunteer to Auschwitz”, the commonly used expression only partially corresponds with the facts.

As already noted, one cannot fully recognise Pilecki as the promoter of the idea to enter Auschwitz and start underground activities there on the basis of source materials. Furthermore, it appears from the materials that the form and circumstances in which Pilecki was assigned the task did not give him many possibilities of refusal. In no way does it diminish his heroism and achievements but only shows that the term “volunteer” in the context of those events is used inaccurately. Using the expression “volunteer to Auschwitz”, one must bear in mind that Pilecki could not be certain that he would be sent precisely to Auschwitz after the September manhunt. Before he was arrested, only one transport of prisoners from Warsaw had been directed to that camp, and it was impossible to predict when another would be organised, if any. One does not have any proof that the Polish underground knew about it either. Moreover, the men captured on 19 September were taken to a railway station next day and sent in three different directions. Some of them were taken to labour camps in the western part of the Reich, some to forced labour in East Prussia and others, including Pilecki, to Auschwitz.⁴⁸

It should be rather assumed that the arrest and transportation to Auschwitz were used by ‘Witold’ as a happy coincidence that enabled him to undertake underground activities in the camp. The opinion that it was planned for him to enter Auschwitz and that it was not a coincidence is supported by his promotion to lieutenant on 11 November 1941 (during his stay in the camp) because, as noticed by Wiesław Jan Wysocki, “it was established in ZWZ-AK that generally prisoners were not promoted or honoured.”⁴⁹

The “second Warsaw transport” with 1705 prisoners reached Auschwitz on during the night of 21–22 September 1940. When he entered the camp, Witold Pilecki, who stayed there under an assumed name of Tomasz Serafiński (no. 4859), started establishing the foundations of the resistance in order to unite the prisoners and raise their spirits, source food and clothes, prepare escapes and send documents, reports and dispatches describing the reality in the camp to the Main Command of ZWZ (later AK) in Warsaw. Formed by Pilecki, the Military Organisation Union (*Związek Organizacji Wojskowej*, ZOW), whose structure was based on secret sworn “fives”, after some time undertook the task to “prepare our own detachments to take over the camp when the time came in the form of an order to parachute in weapons or troops.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Cyra, *Ochotnik...*, p. 64.

⁴⁹ Wysocki, *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki...*, p. 41. The question of his promotion is not entirely clear as Bór-Komorowski promoted Pilecki to captain of cavalry on 19 February 1944 (*Rotmistrz Pilecki [1901–1948]*, p. 24).

⁵⁰ Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer...*, p. 36.

Pilecki passed on news about the dramatic situation of Auschwitz prisoners and activities undertaken by ZOW to Warsaw mainly through people released from the camp and – since 1942, after collective responsibility for escapes was lifted – through escapees.

The first dispatch about extermination caused by the grueling work done by prisoners, bestial punishments and starvation rations was delivered by Pilecki to Warsaw through Aleksander Wielopolski released from the camp in October 1940 (camp number unknown). On the initiative of ZWZ commander General Stefan ‘Grot’ Rowecki, the Polish underground used the information gathered by Pilecki to prepare a report “On the terror and lawlessness of the occupiers” addressed to General Kazimierz Sosnkowski (who was then a minister of the Polish government in exile in London), which contained not only information about various forms and methods of the Nazi repressions but also a description of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Its part entitled “The camp in Auschwitz” described the way in which prisoners were admitted to the camp, its daily schedule, conditions, the types of punishments and the most common causes of death. The report reached London on 18 March 1941.⁵¹

Two ZOW members escaped from the Harmense sub-camp in Harmęże near Oświęcim on 16 May 1942: Lieutenant Wincenty Gawron (no. 11237) and Stefan Bielecki (TAP member, no. 12692). As recorded by Gawron, Pilecki instructed them to pass information about the current situation in the camp to the underground command in Warsaw,

You must inform them how the Germans treat Soviet captives. But the most important thing is the massive extermination of the Jews. Let the command know that children and elders from Slovakia were gassed and that young men and women are used for hard work, which in turn leads to chimneys. Our command must notify London so that the whole world saves the Jews from extinction. They have now started deporting Jews from Belgium and the Netherlands [...]. Those people must be saved too.⁵²

On 30 June 1944, Bielecki, who was supposed to deliver the report to the Main Command of AK, made the following statement to Pilecki:

Having received an order from Witold, I escaped from Auschwitz on 16 May 1942 and reached Warsaw on 30 June 1942, where I delivered a written dispatch to 227 [probably Lieutenant Colonel Jerzy Uszycki – E.C.S.], to whom I personally gave an account of the state of organisational work in the camp. According to the statement, the report was presented to Commander ‘Grot’. Because, since 1943, I had not been summoned to

⁵¹ Published in: *Armia Krajowa w dokumentach 1939–1945*, vol. 1: *Wrzesień 1939–czerwiec 1941*, ed. Tadeusz Pełczyński et al. (Wrocław et al.: Ossolinem, 1990), pp. 431–433.

⁵² Gawron, *Ochotnik...*, p. 248. cf. APMA-B, Wspomnienia, file 183, Witold Pilecki, *Raport W* [Report W], pp. 48, 70.

provide the details of the work, which I could deliver only orally, I contacted the Main Command via 'Skiba' to explain that delay. I received a response that the report had reached them and that I would be summoned if needed.⁵³

The next dispatch from 'Tomasz Serafiński' was delivered to ZWZ-AK command by Lieutenant Stanisław Gustaw Jaster (no. 6438), who made a daring escape from Auschwitz together with three other prisoners on 20 June 1942.

It must be emphasised here that none of the reports has survived. It is also difficult to determine the extent to which they were used by the Main Command of AK.⁵⁴ However, due to the military character of Pilecki's mission and the main principles of ZOW, one might assume that the purpose of this and the subsequent dispatches was mainly to urge the Polish command to liberate Auschwitz using the prisoners' forces and additional external support, that is drops of weapons or bombings over SS warehouses and barracks. Pilecki sought rescue for prisoners also in uniting all the underground organisations in the camp that could be supported by local partisan units.⁵⁵

Contrary to Pilecki's expectations, Warsaw remained silent and did not grant ZOW permission to start fighting. Its lack of reaction was one of the reasons for which Pilecki – together with Jan 'Retko' (Jan Redzej, no. 5430) and Edward Ciesielski (no. 12969) – decided to escape. On the night of 26–27 April 1943, Ciesielski, 'Retko' and Pilecki were staying in a bakers' commando working in a camp bakery located outside of Auschwitz. They went to a woodshed under the pretext of preparing fuel and – using the guards' inattention – unscrewed the bolts holding its metal door and started opening it with the use of a duplicate

⁵³ Several collaborators of Pilecki, including Stefan Bielecki, gave handwritten reports on their missions at the end of *Raport W* in June and July 1944 (APMA-B, Wspomnienia, file 183, Witold Pilecki, *Raport W*, p. 70).

⁵⁴ Testimonies and reports about Auschwitz containing information about the camp current as of November 1940 were used to prepare a three-page document entitled *Oświęcim Concentration Camp*. It ends with the following words: "At the end of November, 1940, 8,000 Poles were at the Oswiecim camps. Theoretically, the prisoners were divided into three groups: 1. Political prisoners; 2. Criminals; 3. Priests and Jews. This last group was persecuted most of all. Scarcely any of them emerged alive." It was attached to a note sent by the Polish government in London to the allied and neutral states on 3 May 1941 (Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* [London: Michael Joseph, 2001], p. 15).

⁵⁵ Garliński, *Oświęcim...*, p. 10. There were underground groups created by military socialists and nationalists operating in the camp from 1940 until 1941. In 1942, they were integrated into one ubiquitous organisation named the Home Army (AK). Left-wing groups remained outside of AK. In 1943, some of them created an international organisation, Kampfgruppe Auschwitz. They were joined by Polish military groups in 1944, and soon the Oświęcim Fighting Council was established. Since the turn of 1942 and 1943, groups of prisoners of various nationalities and Jewish organisations had been formed in the camp. In 1944, the Oświęcim Military Council was started; it consisted of Polish military groups and left-wing groups.

key. Before they escaped, they had managed to cut the alarm bell wire. They left the SS-men barricaded in the woodshed from the outside, headed East and crossed the border of the General Government after several hours.⁵⁶

In June 1943 in Nowy Wiśnicz, when he was already free, Pilecki wrote his first, already-mentioned report from his stay in Auschwitz. He treated it as informal memoirs from the camp. Pilecki decided to bury the eleven-page manuscript in the farm of Ludmiła Serafińska, who gave him shelter. The report saw the light of day only after his death.⁵⁷

In August 1943 in Warsaw, Pilecki started preparing *Raport W* focused on the underground activities in Auschwitz. It was several dozen pages long and addressed to the Main Command of AK. In its introduction, Pilecki specified its character:

Each of the three of us wrote a part of what he experienced and saw in Auschwitz. While writing, 'J' [Jan Redzej], 'E' [Edward Ciesielski] and I shared duties so that they could give a general overview of the camp and I would immortalise events of a different character [...]. Although deficiencies may exist in our descriptions, both in terms of stylistics and omission of some images from that hell, for it is impossible to describe everything on several pages, there is no untruth in those memoirs. They contain much less but not a word too much.⁵⁸

Issues connected with the members and activities of ZOW were described against the background of camp life events but with a clear advantage of detailed information about the activities of the underground in the camp. The content of *Raport W* is predominated by a compilation of three threads: a report on the work of ZOW and its members, Pilecki's experiences in the camp and his related reflection and – to a smaller extent – the methods of prisoners' extermination, including crimes committed against the Jews. *Raport W* should not be treated as a report about the Holocaust *sensu stricto* because information about the treatment of the Jews and suggestions of their extermination appeared in its numerous pages only several times and without their particular situation being in any way distinguished (the fate of different prisoner groups was mentioned with at least the same frequency):

[...] The above-mentioned numbers apply to *Häftlings*, who are recorded and marked with the next prisoner number after they are brought to the camp. It does not include a vast number of people that were brought here to immediately take their lives, which took place in Brzezinka, several

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 121–124.

⁵⁷ According to the testimony of Ludmiła Serafińska, the wife of the real Tomasz Serafiński, Witold Pilecki asked her after the war to destroy the memoirs written in Nowy Wiśnicz because, as he explained, he had written new, better ones. But the memoirs have survived as Serafińska had not complied with his request (Cyra, *Ochotnik...*, p. 13.).

⁵⁸ APMA-B, Wspomnienia, file 183, Witold Pilecki, *Raport W*, p. 2.

kilometres away from the camp, near an Auschwitz sub-camp in Rajsko, where whole transports of people brought there on trains or in trucks were gassed, sometimes several thousand per day. Their number exceeded 800,000 in August 1942 and amounted to more than one and a half million of people in March 1943.⁵⁹ These included mainly Jews, but there were also Czechs, Germans, and others.⁶⁰ [...]

We went past the crematorium. There is a group of men and women standing opposite the entrance. Poles. The impression is exactly the same as the one you have when you are several steps away from a slaughterhouse. Dear God – women, Polish women – in a moment, when we enter the camp, they will be invited to the crematorium alive, they will give them soap and a towel, and they will think they're going to have a bath (sometimes they do not even play this game). [...]

One should at least mention here the brave attitude of priests, not all of them, but still. Initially, a priest would not live longer than several days. They were killed with batons in the square (just as Jews harnessed to a cylinder).⁶¹

Despite the final solution to the Jewish question started in 1942 and realised also within Auschwitz and despite the massive killing of the Jews in gas chambers, Pilecki wrote:

What was particularly painful for us was to find rosaries and prayer books in Polish among tiny shoes and prams scattered in huge piles of clothes and things that belonged to the gassed victims. Among others, inhabitants of several villages in the Lublin region died in this terrible slaughter. Apart from that, 11,400 prisoners of war, Bolsheviks, were killed in our camp and its sub-camps.

It was only the first instance of gassing healthy people that made any impression on us. Several months after the war with the Bolsheviks had begun, the camp authorities received the first several hundred prisoners of war, of whom around seven hundred, in the presence of some committee, were stuffed into one room of Block 11 (the gas chambers were not ready for use yet) and crowded to such an extent that there was no place

⁵⁹ The numbers of the murdered prisoners mentioned by Pilecki are considerably overestimated. According to Franciszek Piper, around 1,300,000 people died in Auschwitz, including 1,100,000 people of Jewish origin (see idem, *Ilu ludzi zginęło w KL Auschwitz. Liczba ofiar w świetle źródeł i badań* (Oświęcim: Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum, 1992).

⁶⁰ Pilecki referred to the transports of March 1943 later in the report too: "In March 1943, whole gypsy families were brought to Brzezinka, for whom a separate camp was established. Later, some of the gypsy men were brought to us. Together with the Dutch, Norwegian, French, Jewish, German, Yugoslavian, Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Belgian, Bulgarian and Romanian prisoners, we formed a sheer tower of Babel," (APMA-B, Wspomnienia, file 183, Witold Pilecki, *Raport W*, p. 60).

⁶¹ Ibidem, pp. 49, 56, 63.

to stand there any more, the whole room was sealed and – in the presence of the retinue in gas masks – they were gassed.⁶²

The extermination of the Jews in the camp is mentioned in the report three times more in greater detail:

[...] Just as in Katyń, the bodies of the murdered (gassed) prisoners were initially buried in Brzezinka in huge ditches. This was done by a special ‘Kommando’ composed of Jews only who were kept alive for two weeks and then gassed. [...]

SS-men were particularly pleased with Czech packages, which – apart from cake and sugar – always contained wine, oranges and lemons. Wine was officially confiscated, but Czechs and French Jews, who received rich parcels too, were most often dead already, so whole packages were taken by SS-men.

From time to time, SS-men would appear in the block in the evening. They would gather Jews and tell them to write letters to their homes with the compulsory formula: “I feel fine, and I’m doing well.” The letters brought new groups of Jews to the camp, which – on hearing the news that their fellow believers are doing so well – were more willing to volunteer for “work in Germany”. They also brought new packages for SS-men as their authors were finished off in the meantime.⁶³

There is one more aspect in *Raport W* that requires attention. In collective consciousness, it is called the first report on the Holocaust. This is also what is found in the currently most popular source of knowledge, Wikipedia, which is compared to *Encyclopedia Britannica* in terms of information correctness.⁶⁴ As already mentioned, the report indeed tackled several issues concerning the position of the Jews in Auschwitz but did not focus on them. Reports on the situation of the Jewish population in the occupied country were written since 1940, and their number was growing together with the escalation of the anti-Jewish policy.⁶⁵

Pilecki’s intention was for *Raport W* and his personal intervention in the Main Command of AK to help him obtain approval for organising a campaign intended to liberate the Auschwitz prisoners. His efforts, however, did not achieve the desired reaction. The Main Command of AK did not support the plan proposed by Pilecki and justified their refusal on the grounds that the resistance in the camp was defenceless and lacked basic fighting equipment in comparison with the numerous and well-equipped SS staff. Moreover, the

⁶² Ibidem, pp. 49, 57.

⁶³ Ibidem, pp. 57, 62.

⁶⁴ See entry “Witold’s Report,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witold's_Report (access 22 December 2016). The same information can be found in the Polish Wikipedia.

⁶⁵ See *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939–1945*, ed. Władysław Bartoszewski, Zofia Lewinówna (Cracow: Znak, 2013).

majority of the prisoners were too exhausted, making it impossible for them to escape. It would be equally problematic to transport so many thousands of prisoners, provide them with basic medical care and – most of all – find a shelter for them. All the measures necessary to prepare such a campaign were in short supply in the Home Army. Furthermore, the equipment of the underground was used mainly to conduct intelligence and for sabotage, subversive and retaliatory actions. Even those activities were often withheld by orders from above in fear of an escalation of Nazi revenge on the Polish nation. The command also decided that one should not put at risk invaluable human resources and materials gathered for the eventuality of a potential uprising against the Germans.

After his escape from the camp, Pilecki involved himself in the activities of Kedyw, the Directorate of Subversion of the Main Command of AK, under an assumed name of Roman Jezierski. He became a member of a newly established conspiratorial organisation NIE (NO or NIE as in *niepodległość* – “independence”). Afterwards, he fought in the Warsaw Uprising, already as a cavalry captain. After the fall of the uprising, he was taken prisoner by the Germans. Pilecki lived to his liberation in Oflag Murnau, Bavaria. In July 1945, he joined the Polish Second Corps, stationed in Italy. With a mission of gathering intelligence for the Second Corps, he returned to Warsaw already in December. Due to the dissolution of NIE, Pilecki started recreating his network based on the former TAP and ZOW members. At the same time, the communist authorities were conducting activities intended to crush the Polish underground. Witold Pilecki was arrested on 8 May 1947 and sentenced to death. Requests for pardon for the soldier of two world wars and the organiser of the underground in the camp submitted to President Bolesław Bierut were of no avail. Witold Pilecki was shot in the back of his head on 25 May 1948.

Many issues related to his arrest and death still need explanation and to be determined, especially because it was only the fall of the communist system that liberated the historical narrative from the limitations of censorship. At the same time, there still exist difficulties in writing about some issues that could destroy the heroic legend of Pilecki.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Professor Andrzej Romanowski (a publicist and literature specialist at the Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University) was quite recently accused of undermining the legend of Pilecki. In his text “Tajemnica Witolda Pileckiego” (*Polityka* 20 [2013]), he referred to Jacek Pawłowicz’s album published by IPN 2008 and mentioned earlier in the article (*Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki [1901–1948]*). Romanowski paid particular attention to Witold Pilecki’s interview reports. It appears from the content of his testimony that Pilecki revealed the names of his underground collaborationists to Security Office functionaries. According to Romanowski, this fact disagrees with the texts inaugurating the IPN publication, which are “hagiographic in tone”. The article provoked many discussions (of rarely substantive nature) encouraged by right-wing media and a wave of accusations of a “disgraceful attack” on the memory of Captain Pilecki against Romanowski.

The article does not aspire to exhaust the topic of still unexplained issues related to Witold Pilecki but leaves the task to his future biographers. Among various initiatives intended to commemorate Pilecki undertaken since the 1990s, its purpose is only to draw one's attention to the necessity to correct and complete Pilecki's biographies through a detailed and careful study of all the available sources so that it becomes possible to avoid factual errors, inaccurate expressions and – above all – the unnecessary myth making that is simply not needed by the undoubtedly heroic figure of Captain Witold Pilecki.

Translated by *Paulina Chojnowska*

Abstract

This article is an attempt to analyse the historical memory of Witold Pilecki functioning in the reference literature and collective consciousness. The author concentrates on their idealising and simplistic elements, which lead to mythologization of Pilecki, and asks about the genesis and purpose of creation of myths about the Captain. Basing on an analysis of the sources, Cuber questions the legitimacy of the two popular expressions used with regard to Pilecki, that is, “volunteer to Auschwitz” and “the author of the first report about the Holocaust.” In this way the author points out the necessity to correct and supplement Pilecki's biography by means of a careful and cautious analysis of all the available sources.

Key words

Witold Pilecki, Captain Pilecki, volunteer to Auschwitz, Pilecki's report, *Raport W*