

WITOLD PILECKI



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The only known voluntary inmate of Auschwitz, who spent two and a half years gathering intelligence from within the camp.



'The game which I was now playing in Auschwitz was dangerous. This sentence does not really convey the reality; in fact, I had gone far beyond what people in the real world would consider dangerous...'

Witold Pilecki (*pronounced Vitold Piletski*) is a celebrated hero in Poland. Yet his incredible story and the extent of his sacrifice remained buried for over 40 years after his execution. Pilecki is the only inmate known to be voluntarily imprisoned at Auschwitz, the notorious concentration and death camp. After his escape, he wrote a 100-page report on camp life.

Pilecki was born on 13 May 1901 to patriotic Polish Catholic parents in Olonets – a small town in what was then the Russian Empire. After serving in the Polish Army, he settled in Lida (then in Poland, now in Belarus). He married a local school teacher Maria Ostrowska in 1931 and had two children, Andrzej and Zofia. Pilecki ran the family farm and enjoyed painting and writing poetry.

In August 1939, Pilecki was called up to defend Poland against the Nazi invasion. Following the defeat, Pilecki made his way to Warsaw to fight with the Polish underground resistance (the Home Army) against Nazi occupation.

In August 1940, a group of Polish political opponents were imprisoned in Auschwitz. Soon after, telegrams arrived to inform inmates' families of their deaths. This sparked the suspicion of the Polish underground and Pilecki volunteered to investigate.

On 19 September 1940, Pilecki intentionally allowed himself to be arrested by the Nazis. He was detained nearby for two days with an estimated 1,800 Polish political prisoners before being transported to Auschwitz. He remained there for the next two and a half years as prisoner 4859.

Pilecki's mission was to raise the morale of Polish political prisoners by bringing news from outside the camp, as well as to report on camp conditions to the Home Army in Warsaw. In October 1940, Pilecki successfully sent out his first report with a released inmate. It reached the Polish Government-in-exile in March 1941, who passed it onto the Allies.

At the time of Pilecki's internment, Auschwitz was a concentration camp intended to hold predominantly political prisoners from Poland. He witnessed the changing demographic and horrifying treatment of each persecuted group. His reports described the early experiments conducted on Soviet prisoners of war, who were murdered with poisonous gas. This laid the foundations for the mass-murder of many Jews in the purpose-built gas chambers and crematoria. Pilecki describes the pain suffered by the Roma and Sinti prisoners undergoing sterilisation experiments against their will; many died from their injuries.

Pilecki quickly found fellow members of the Polish underground and began to create a secret organisation within Auschwitz. The organisation ran at great risk. They built a radio transmitter from smuggled parts. Through this transmitter, Pilecki reported on camp conditions and the number of deaths until the risk of discovery became too high.

Pilecki's bravery and will-power cannot be overstated. In his report he describes the hunger as 'the hardest battle of [his] life'. He harboured doubts during stays in the lice-ridden hospital ward suffering from Pneumonia and Typhus. He was overwhelmed by his mission at times, but refused to admit it to his colleagues in case it damaged their morale.

Initially, Pilecki's organisation took a strong stance against escape attempts, owing to the group punishment inflicted on the inmates left behind. However, once group punishment was abandoned, the organisation actively assisted escapees. On one occasion, Pilecki gave up his own planned escape route through the sewers to an inmate in more imminent danger.

Pilecki eventually escaped in April 1943. Key members of his organisation had been shipped to other camps and Pilecki's transfer was imminent. Pilecki and his two companions had only one night to carry out the complicated plan they had designed together. Failure would result in a public execution by hanging. They successfully removed the bolts from a heavy door whilst the guards' backs were turned. The three escapees journeyed for 100km on foot before they could rest in relative safety. It took them a week.

Pilecki rested at a colleague's parents' home before visiting the nearest member of the Home Army. After three and a half months, and still no action taken by the Home Army to liberate Auschwitz, Pilecki returned to Warsaw.

He fought in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 but their defeat led to Pilecki's imprisonment in POW camps in Germany. Here, he earned the nickname 'Daddy' from younger inmates, who he looked after.

When the camps were liberated at the end of the war, Pilecki was sent to Italy where he joined the Polish Armed Forces. Whilst here he wrote his comprehensive report on his time in Auschwitz, now known as Witold's Report. Despite his relative safety in Italy, Pilecki returned once again to Warsaw to gather intelligence on the newly established Polish Communist government. The Nazis had been overthrown, but so had the Polish Government-in-exile. To Pilecki and the Home Army, Poland was still not free, but subservient to their Soviet liberators.

Pilecki was captured by the Communist Polish authorities on 8 May 1947. Accused of spying and of planning to assassinate key figures in the Polish police, he was coerced and tortured to sign his 'confession'.

Pilecki stood an unfair trial where he was not permitted to testify, nor were there any defending witnesses. The trial was a sham – a deterrent to any other would-be opposition to the Communist regime. He was subsequently found guilty and executed on 25 May 1948 in Mokotow prison with a shot to the back of his head.

In 1990, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist regime in Poland, Pilecki was finally exonerated posthumously and recognised for his actions during World War Two.

Find out more...

Nazi Persecution: [hmd.org.uk/nazipersecution](https://www.hmd.org.uk/nazipersecution)

The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery by Witold Pilecki, Jarek Garlinski (Translator), Michael Schudrich (Foreword)

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