

Witold Pilecki (1901 – 1948)

Pilecki was a grandson of Polish Siberian exiles, who had fought for freedom against the Tsar. His parents instilled in him compassion and patriotism.

At thirteen, Pilecki joined an underground scouting cell, an organization banned by the Tsar. At eighteen, he volunteered for a mounted guerrilla unit in the Wilno area, where the local Poles were defending themselves against the forces of anarchy unleashed by the Revolution in Russia. A year later, Pilecki served in a regular cavalry regiment in the Polish-Bolshevik War (1920). He was twice decorated for bravery.

In 1926, he retired to his estate at Skurczyce near Wilno. Pilecki became a gentleman farmer and an avid horse-breeder. The idyllic country life was interrupted by the invasion of Poland by Hitler and Stalin in September 1939. Second Lieutenant (later Captain) Pilecki fought until his unit was nearly completely annihilated. Those who survived cached their weapons and continued the struggle underground.

In September 1940 the intrepid freedom fighter volunteered for a reconnaissance mission to the mysterious new Nazi installation, the concentration camp at Auschwitz. To achieve this end, **Pilecki simply allowed himself to be arrested by the Gestapo. He was beaten for two days and then duly sent to Auschwitz.** He became **prisoner no.4859**. Nonetheless, Pilecki immediately set out to establish an underground group (Union of Military Organizations, ZOW) at the camp and to assist fellow prisoners. Their ultimate goal was an armed rising to free Auschwitz. Most of the participants of the ZOW would be killed by the Germans and the planned insurrection would not breakout. **After three years of torture, forced labour, untold brutality, and rampant diseases, Pilecki escaped from Auschwitz on Easter Sunday in April 1943. He submitted a report about the camp revealing the genocidal nature of Auschwitz, Pilecki called for the bombing of the camp. His plea was not heeded.**

Meanwhile, the ex-prisoner, despite his utter exhaustion, was assigned to Home Army intelligence. In addition, Captain Pilecki became a part of a new underground structure, set up in the terrifying case of Stalin's conquest of Poland.

In August and September 1944, Captain Pilecki fought against the German Nazis in the Warsaw Rising – in which losses on the Polish side amounted to over 260,000 dead.

After the fall of Poland's capital, he was imprisoned at a German POW camp. Following the liberation, Pilecki joined the Free Polish Forces in the West. His assignment was intelligence. The Captain volunteered to return to Poland in September 1946. Once back in Warsaw, Pilecki established an autonomous underground cell. It collected intelligence on the Soviet occupation and the Communist terror apparatus. It also passed orders to Polish guerrilla units to suspend the armed struggle and dissolve.

In May 1947, the Communists secret police arrested Pilecki. He was tortured horribly; his fingernails were torn off. But Pilecki refused to confess. He was subsequently tried on trumped up charges as a "foreign agent". **The hero of Auschwitz was judicially murdered by the Communists with a single shot to the head in Warsaw on May 25th, 1948.**

After Communism collapsed, Pilecki was fully exonerated by a military tribunal in October 1991. His body has still not been found. His legend is alive and well.

Based on a compilation by Marek Jan Chodakiewicz

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