

STORIES OF POLISH RESISTANCE



Irena
Sendler



Maximilian
Kolbe



Emanuel
Ringelblum



Mordechai
Anielewicz



Witold
Pilecki



Janusz
Korczak



Jan
Karski



Zofia
Kossak-
Szczucka



Father
Marceli
Godlewski



Jan &
Antonina
Zabinski



Józef &
Wiktoria
Ulma

About half of the six million European Jews killed in the Holocaust were Polish. In 1939 a third of the capital city Warsaw, and 10% of the entire country was Jewish. By 1945 97% of Poland's Jews were dead.

These eleven examples of Polish resistance *do not* proprt to give an overview of what happened in Poland during The Holocaust. They have been chosen to reflect the unimaginably difficult choices made by both Jews and non-Jews under German occupation – where every Jew was marked for death and all non-Jews who assisted their Jewish neighbours were subject to the same fate.

These individuals *were not* typical; they were exceptional, reflecting the relatively small proportion of the population who refused to be bystanders. But neither were they super-human. They would recoil from being labelled as heroes. They symbolise the power of the human spirit – their actions show that in even the darkest of times, good can shine through...

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WITOLD PILECKI 1901 - 1948



Witold Pilecki is the only inmate known to be voluntarily imprisoned at Auschwitz. His incredible story of self-sacrifice remained hidden for over 40 years after his execution.

Pilecki was born on 13 May 1901 in Olonets – a small town in what was then the Russian Empire. After serving in the Polish Army, he married Maria Ostrowska, a schoolteacher, in 1931 and had two children, Andrzej and Zofia. He devoted himself to running the family farm and enjoyed painting and writing poetry.



WITOLD PILECKI 1901 - 1948



In August 1939, when Poland was invaded by Germany, Pilecki was called up to the army. After Poland's defeat he made his way to Warsaw to fight with the underground resistance. In August 1940, news arrived of the death of a group of Polish political opponents who had been imprisoned in Auschwitz. This caused alarm within the Polish underground and Pilecki volunteered to investigate. On 19 September 1940, he intentionally allowed himself to be arrested by the Nazis and 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, he 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.

WITOLD PILECKI 1901 - 1948

While imprisoned in the camp Pilecki witnessed the horrifying mistreatment of inmates. 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 also reported on the suffering of the Roma and Sinti prisoners undergoing sterilisation experiments against their will; many of who died from their injuries. Pilecki eventually created an underground organisation within Auschwitz. They built a radio transmitter from parts smuggled in by civilians who worked at the camp. This enabled him to report 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' and was overwhelmed by the task he had set himself but refused to admit this to his colleagues in case it damaged their morale.



The English translation of the sign above the gates of Auschwitz is "Work Liberates". The aim was to give the impression that this German concentration camp was only a labour camp.

WITOLD PILECKI 1901 - 1948

At first escape attempts were discouraged because of 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 his own planned escape route to an inmate in more imminent danger. He eventually escaped in April 1943 - he and two companions successfully removed the bolts from a heavy door whilst the guards' backs were turned. They journeyed for 100km on foot which took them a week. He returned to Warsaw and fought in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 but that defeat led to Pilecki's further imprisonment in POW camps in Germany, where he earned the nickname 'Daddy' from the younger inmates 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 and wrote comprehensively about his time in Auschwitz.



‘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 1901 - 1948

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 subservient to their Soviet liberators and therefore still not free. Witold Pilecki was captured by the Communist Polish authorities on 8 May 1947 and accused of spying and of planning to assassinate key figures in the Polish police. He was tortured into signing his 'confession' and put through a sham-trial, where he was not permitted to testify, and no witnesses were called. The trial was used to deter any other opposition to the Soviet Communist regime.



WITOLD PILECKI 1901 - 1948



He was subsequently executed on 25 May 1948. In 1990, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist regime in Poland, Pilecki was finally exonerated and recognised for his actions during World War Two.