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How it was possible for Witold Pilecki to establish an underground force in Auschwitz			
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## **1 Introduction**

Captain Witold Pilecki was a Polish spy, who built up an underground organization in the concentration camp Auschwitz. In Warsaw, he was part of the Polish resistance group TAP, and he had already fought in the Polish-Bolshevik war on behalf of the Polish side. After the TAP<sup>1</sup> found out about the opening of Auschwitz they decided that they needed a member to infiltrate the camp to collect information and lead an uprising (Fairweather 43). He volunteered to be captured and walked into an SS street round-up in Warsaw. This man decided to be taken to the deadliest camp of all with the mission to destroy this inhuman and murderous facility. That sounds more like a made-up Hollywood story but it is true to life. But his heroic story got more and more forgotten over the years. Now there are books being published about him and the Polish Pilecki Institute set up a subsidiary in Berlin to offer a wider range and reach of research and information about this chapter in Polish history<sup>2</sup>. In 2019 their first exhibition about Pilecki and his story was opened<sup>3</sup>.

## **2 Thesis: How it was possible for Witold Pilecki to establish an underground force in Auschwitz**

In this paper I am going to talk about how Witold Pilecki managed to survive, how he kept his willpower and what methods he used to establish a successful underground force, which was capable of saving countless men without getting destroyed or even known by the Nazis.

### **2.1 Building a community despite an inhuman and cruel environment**

The concentration camps by the Nazi party are not comparable to the prisons we know today. People got imprisoned without any particular reason, the camps were means of oppression of minorities and political opponents before they got used for the systematical genocide of the Jewish population. As a result of the Nazis' racial ideology the prisoners were not treated as humans, rather like animals. We can not comprehend the cruelty of this place but try to acknowledge it the best we can.

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1 See 4 abbreviations

2 "About us" <https://instytutpileckiego.pl/en/berlin/o-nas>

3 "Exhibition" <https://instytutpileckiego.pl/en/berlin/wystawy>

### **2.1.1 Explanation of Auschwitz' system of dehumanization**

Even though all the Nazi concentration camps had the same organizational structure, Auschwitz was different. Not only because it was the largest and deadliest with over one million deaths<sup>4</sup>, but also it was the first camp, which targeted a specific group of people, in this case Poles. Since in the Nazi race ideology ethnic Poles were one of the most hated and persecuted groups, the conditions and the handling of the prisoners were even worse than in other concentration camps like the ones in Sachsenhausen or Dachau (Garliński 22). In 1940, when Witold Pilecki was transported to Auschwitz, the main goal of the camp was to exploit the labor force and eradicate any kind of resistance among Polish political opponents like Pilecki himself. Only later it became the main scene of the Jewish Holocaust (Paliwoda 91). The process of dehumanization in order for the men to obey started at their arrival. Most of the prisoners had a long journey in stuffed trains without any water or food, unsure which destination they were facing. The arrival put them into great shock and unable to realize their situation or to act. The guards used trained dogs, harsh treatment and random outbreaks of violence to show the newcomers that they were now in a place of no humanity. Their lives were solely in the hands of the guards. This becomes clear from the following statement made by Pilecki himself in his report:

“I consider this place in my story to be the moment when I bade farewell to everything I had hitherto known on this earth and entered something seemingly no longer of it. [...] Our concepts of law and order and of what was normal, all those ideas to which we had become accustomed on this earth, were given a brutal kicking.” (Pilecki 13)

One of the first intentions of the SS<sup>5</sup> after the arrival was destroying the personality of the captives. The men got a number to be identified with instead of a name and every hair on their body was shaved off. As soon as the prisoners got off the trains the guards sorted out the well-educated ones, such as lawyers, priests and judges and then beat them to death. The Nazis only wanted the working class since the academics were too much of a danger. They made sure the men knew

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4 “Auschwitz-Birkenau: The Past and the Present”  
[http://auschwitz.org/gfx/auschwitz/userfiles/auschwitz/historia\\_terazniejszosc/auschwitz\\_historia\\_terazniejszosc\\_wer\\_angielska\\_2010.pdf](http://auschwitz.org/gfx/auschwitz/userfiles/auschwitz/historia_terazniejszosc/auschwitz_historia_terazniejszosc_wer_angielska_2010.pdf)

5 See 4 Abbreviations

why they were here and what their future would look like, nothing was sugarcoated once they were in the camp. Fritz Seidler <sup>6</sup>put this clear in his ‘welcome speech’:

“Let none of you imagine that he will ever leave this place alive. The rations have been calculated so that you will only survive six weeks. Anyone who lives longer must be stealing, and anyone stealing will be sent to the penal company, where you won’t live very long.” (Fairweather 51)

The life in the camps was filled with hard labor, constant fear of death and humiliation by the guards. The continual witnessing of death and torture made the future of every captives unpredictable and unsafe. Prisoners were deprived of their basic human needs, such as food, hygiene, medical needs and privacy. When chronic hunger arose, it had severe and very apparent consequences as it has not only has effects on the body, such as reducing muscles, but also a huge impact on the human mind. Symptoms of dullness, indifference, apathy and irritability are connected with starvation (Dr. Baker, Keramidas). This sets the prisoners in a frail state of mind where one is unable to think rationally and the body starts to be in the surviving state. Dr. Wladyslaw Dering<sup>7</sup>, a member of Pilecki’s organization, named hunger as the camp’s “real danger” (Fairweather 70). There were a few types of reactions among the men in this situation. Many did not have the willpower to survive and gave up, this kind of prisoner usually died very soon after his arrival. Some others like Pilecki did have the willpower and hope for a life after the camp and did the best they could to survive. Some others accepted the system completely and adapted to the concept of morality in the camp.

### **2.1.2 Requirements for forming a community**

In the early months of the camp, when Pilecki was imprisoned, there were no such communities as we know them in prisons these days to this extent, despite the majority of the inmates being Poles and political opponents. Everyone was a threat to each other and there was no sense of solidarity among the inmates. Everybody fought for themselves in order to survive. To establish his resistance Pilecki had to home in on any signs of humanity and hope from his inmates. The members had to trust him and he had to trust them in order to be able to work

<sup>6</sup> See 5 List of characters

<sup>7</sup> See 5 List of characters

together. Naturally trusting inmates in such an environment meant great risk but Pilecki had not lost his hope in humanity. When a recruit asked him why Pilecki trusted him of all people he just answered: “Dear boy, you have to trust people.” (Fairweather 31). Because Witold was already involved in the TAP in Warsaw, he was known and therefore more likely to be trusted by fellow prisoners, who recognized him even though he was imprisoned under a false name, Tomasz Seranfiński<sup>8</sup>. This was intended to protect his family and himself from being detected by the SS. His organization had to offer help and safety so men would be willing to risk joining the underground resistance. In this environment food was highly valuable, so Pilecki’s main goals were to gather as many men and as much influence as possible to provide extra portions of food for his members. The organization also intended to help their men by getting them into good indoor jobs, or if they were sick, into the hospital (Pilecki 36). Indoor work was so sought-after, because it protected them from the weather in the winter and also because it was less physically demanding than the outdoor work, which at that time consisted mostly of expanding the camp by building barracks or roads.

## **2.2 How Pilecki’s underground force strengthened their position**

To have any influence the underground force had to have a strong position in the camp. By only focusing on one operation the organization would not have gained enough influence, so Pilecki made sure his organization had a presence all around the camp. The most important locations and operations were the ones with the most power to help the prisoners.

### **2.2.1 Maintaining connections to the outside**

One of Pilecki’s achievements with his organization was the ability to reach the outside world. The main purpose of these operations was smuggling supplies like food, clothes or medicine into the camp but also sending reports off. Even though just a few prisoners profited from the outside smuggling of food and medicine, I think it was highly important for the success of the resistance. Since the extra portions of food and clothes boosted their strength and motivation, it saved lives

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8 See 5 List of characters

especially in the cold winter. Through his years in the camp Pilecki was able to send several reports to Warsaw to reach the Polish government-in-exile and their British allies hoping for help and rescue. Especially in the first year of the camp the Germans were willing to release prisoners if their family pulled the right strings in Berlin or had enough money. Pilecki made use of this. If one of his men was about to be released, he gave them an oral report to memorize and deliver to Warsaw. This way his first oral reports made their way outside. Later, when the camp changed and the SS did not want more information to be leaked, the underground organization had to find another way to bring their reports out in the world.

To build relationships with people living on the outside Wladyslaw Surmacki<sup>9</sup> was an important figure. He was a fellow inmate and also a member of the TAP, who worked in the building office in the camp. Renovating houses in the area for SS-men and their families or demolishing buildings for supplies was a big part of the prisoners' work at the beginning of the camp. Since Surmacki was a trained surveyor engineer he was valued and had a good position in the office. Surmacki was able to recruit men from the squads, who worked outside the camp and had contact to the local people, into the organization. With Helena Stupka<sup>10</sup>, a housewife who lived near the camp in Oświęcim, an important link to the outside was made. Even though a prisoner having contact with someone outside meant a great risk for both of them, some still tried to help the men. At first the help was unorganized and primitive, like Stupka smuggling home-made bread to the prisoners, but it soon developed into a well-organized chain getting all kinds of things into the camp. Besides that, Pilecki got information about the war from the locals, which was highly valuable since the prisoners were completely shut off from the world. One member described the effects on the morale of the men like this: "People were living on this. From this news we took fresh energy" (Fairweather 131). News of Germany having military setbacks gave the men hope for a quick end of the German Nazi regime and for their rescue, which strengthened their community.

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9 See 5 List of characters

10 See 5 List of characters

### 2.2.2 Usage of the hospital as shelter

The image of the hospital in Auschwitz changed a lot during the camp's existence. In the winter of 1941-42 the hospital was feared by the prisoners. Different to our image of help and recovering the hospital in the camp was seen as a "waiting room for the crematorium" (Strzelecka 382). Most of the men who were taken to the hospital did not leave alive. The conditions there were terrible. The patients were stuffed in overcrowded rooms lying on thin mattresses on the ground and often were infested with fleas and lice because of the lack of hygiene. Due to the spreading typhoid epidemic among the prisoners, doctors were quick to treat their patients with a deadly phenol injection so the prisoners did everything to avoid getting admitted into this facility even if they were seriously sick.

But this image changed and the hospital became one of the most important parts of the organization when the resistance got a hold on positions. Unlike the rest of the camp the hospital had its own separate system, so it was independent of the camp (Strzelecka 380). The staff did not have to attend roll call, where the prisoners often had to stand outside for several hours and the work was relatively easy compared to the hard labor outside in the gravel pits. This made these jobs very much sought-after. An important figure in the hospital was Dr. Dering. He was one of the first of Pilecki's recruits. After playing by the rules by acting harshly with patients and pretending to believe in the camp's system for some time, he gained the trust of SS-Hauptsturmführer Max Popiersch<sup>11</sup> (Fairweather 125-126). Popiersch was in charge of the hospital at that time and arranged a good position as a doctor for him. Dering's job was to inspect sick prisoners and decide whether they would get accepted into the hospital or not. I think this was highly valuable for the underground, because it gave him the power to help prisoners and especially members of the resistance. Even Pilecki himself got saved from death by Dering when he had pneumonia and then got a job as a male nurse afterwards (Fairweather 106). Pilecki's case was not an individual case, the resistance saved the lives of countless other men through the hospital.

The staff had developed methods of avoiding SS policies and saving prisoners' lives. The most common method was readmitting patients shortly after they were discharged in order to bypass time limits, or hiding seriously ill patients, who

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<sup>11</sup> See 5 List of characters



would be sent to their death bed if SS-doctors saw them (Strzelecka 388). Over time almost every hospital staff member except for SS-doctors was connected with the underground so the hospital became something like a shelter for its members. Dering, Pilecki and the other members also managed to organize and smuggle medicine and other medical supplies into the hospital. The facility did not have any connections to the outside but since the resistance was spread around the whole camp, larger projects like smuggling medicine from the warehouse up to the hospital were possible.

### **2.2.3 Kapos and block chiefs**

Becoming influential was difficult for the resistance movement especially at the beginning of the camp's existence. In 1940, when the camp opened, prisoners, mainly criminals, from the already existing German KZ Sachsenhausen were transported to Auschwitz (Garliński 21). These were the first prisoners and became the block chiefs or Kapos. They were also called "trusties" because they switched sides and stood on the side of the SS. Block chiefs were the supervisors of one prisoner block. Part of their responsibilities was to make sure the captives followed the rules of the camp. This included for example keeping their block clean, sending the men off to their work squad and being in charge of the food servings (Garliński 32). The responsibility of a Kapo was to supervise the labor, each one was the head of a work squad.

Along with their power also came certain privileges such as getting more and better food, also they were often exempted from the hard labor (Fairweather 56). So these positions were very highly sought after. German guards assigned these positions and naturally they only picked the ones in their favor, which meant prisoners who were well adapted to the system and its moral concept. Any Kapo who showed empathy towards his squad risked being demoted from the position. A prisoner who switched sides, accepted this hierarchy and turned his back on his inmates for his own well-being never found his way back into the community and often died very soon after. This led to an everlasting increase of cruelty as a product of especially Kapos fearing to be demoted. The criminals worked perfectly as an extended arm of the Germans to teach the Polish prisoners the system and were known to be even crueler than the SS-men. Pilecki knew that in

order to have an influential and powerful organization, these positions were important. He had to get them on his side, but the camp eldest were feared by anyone and trying to convince them or even telling them that there was such a thing as a resistance movement would have been suicide.

Over time the camp expanded rapidly and new positions for Kapos and block chiefs were opening up everywhere without “enough German prisoners to fill them” (Fairweather 131). This way Polish prisoners and members of the resistance took these places, which had important consequences for Pilecki’s organization. These positions had a certain power within their squads. Getting a hold on a few extra portions of food and protecting their squads were abilities the Block chiefs and Kapos possessed, which made them so useful to the organization. As a result of that the resistance gained a certain control and power on the smallest scale in the camp.

But even if the Kapo was not a direct member of the organization, him being Polish was very useful. The first German prisoners were totally excluded from the community of all the other Polish prisoners. With more and more Kapos and Block chiefs being Polish the urge to help their community became relevant. Pilecki’s men made use of this. Members intentionally befriended Polish men in power to ask them for little favors like an extra portion of food for a friend or the permission to stay indoors to clean the barracks (Fairweather 131). So the resistance used the Kapos and block chief without them knowing.

### **2.3 How the organization stayed unknown and safe**

From the beginning of the organization Pilecki knew how important his own and his fellow’s safety was. The constant observation by the Gestapo and inmates turning against each other made it hard to trust others and building up an organization meant great risk. Nonetheless Pilecki’s men managed to keep the organization undetected and the SS never really found out about the depth and extent of the resistance (Fairweather 136). I think the reason for this are Pilecki’s elaborate approach and precautionary measures to secure his and his men’s lives.

### **2.3.1 Organization of members in ‘fives’**

Soon after his arrival Pilecki realized that recruiting members was going to be very difficult. He had to come up with a good and unobtrusive method, which ensured their safety but also gave the organization potential to grow. Therefore Pilecki chose a structure which split up the men into small groups of five members. The men did not know each other as fellow members and were only connected through the leader of those ‘five’ (Garliński 39). Also any contact between different ‘fives’ was strictly prevented. Only Pilecki knew every member of the organization (Fairweather 136). But that does not mean every ‘five’ was coordinated by him. The higher ‘fives’ sub-coordinated the lower ones. The first ‘five’ he formed were called the ‘Upper five’ and consisted, amongst others of Dr. Dering and Surmacki (Pilecki 37). Those men were directly under Pilecki and had important leading roles in the organization.

These groups were highly functional and in my opinion one of the main reasons for the success of the resistance. This system prevented the downfall of the whole organization if one man got caught and interrogated. If the Gestapo found out about one man’s underground work or is a mission failed, the operating men got caught and tortured for answers. Pilecki knew that in the end every man talks. But the system let the man only give away a few names of other fellow member just because he simply did not know the rest. The number of losses were high but without this precaution it probably would have been much higher and the resistance would might have fallen apart.

But Pilecki’s method did not only keep the number of men lost low but also kept the morale and the commitment of the men high. As a result of any member not knowing the full extent of the organization the man tended to overestimate the importance of his missions. He thought he was a member high up in the structure of the organization with great impact even though he might be in the lowest five of the resistance (Pilecki 37). This boosted their motivation and they felt useful and it gave their life a purpose.

### **2.3.2 How the resistance fought back**

In terms of fighting back the resistance had to be careful. Every project had to be well thought-out and the chance of getting caught and then killed was always high. Pilecki was aware of this problem, so his organization took another approach. To get caught the guards had to know that they were being attacked. To change that their attacks had to be subtle. This way the SS did not even know the presence of a resistance movement. They had a sense that something like that might exist but underestimated the extent and the depth of its structure. A good example of this is the project of Witold Kosztowny<sup>12</sup>, an early resistance member who worked in the hospital (Pilecki 224). When the typhoid epidemic raged in the camp, he bred lice, which were infected with the disease. Because you can not differentiate between an uninfected and an infected one, his project was overall safe (Garliński 57). These vermin got spread on the clothe of SS-men in order for them to get sick, which brought great losses on their side (Pilecki 186). But I think Kosztowny's attack was not the only one, it is simply the only one we know about. The operations were so subtle and secret, that only a few men knew about them and written documents about anything that happened in the camp do not exist. This makes the research and acknowledgement of their achievements difficult. Many men took their success made in the name of resistance with them to their graves.

### **2.3.3 Secretive nature of the resistance**

When we look at other resistances against the Nazis in the Second World War, we see huge differences between them and Pilecki's underground mainly because Auschwitz was a completely different battleground to fight on, and they had to use different techniques. The French resistance against the Nazi occupation in France had a name, a symbol, was armed and widely known, which was not the case in Auschwitz. The members did not know each other nor the extent of the organization. Pilecki and his men came up with the name "The Union of Military Organization" (Garliński 45) but for safety reasons the name never really saw much use or was widely unknown to its members. They never openly stood up for one another, which may seem odd but was the core of their community and

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12 See 5 List of character

essential to protect themselves and others. The smallest impression of any humane community was destroyed by the SS and their henchmen, so the inmates had to hide their friendships and will to resist.

### **3. Conclusion**

Witold Pilecki escaped from Auschwitz in 1943. After the war, Poland became a communist Soviet satellite state similar to the rest of Eastern Europe<sup>13</sup>. Pilecki was arrested and charged with espionage and preparing assassination attempts. After a short show trial, he got sentenced to death and got executed in 1947. In my opinion his story is so mesmerizing and remarkable, because at the end Captain Witold Pilecki was not very different from you and me. He was an ordinary man, who overcame his own needs to save others and took action when many looked away. Especially now in the current political situation we can all use him as a benchmark for our actions. At his trial he got the chance to say one last thing to the jury, which sums up his remarkable moral capacity:

“I tried to live my life in such a fashion so that in my last hour, I would rather be happy than fearful. I find happiness in knowing that the fight was worth it.” (Fairweather 384)

I think it is very good that his story is becoming more and more recognized and acknowledged. A Hollywood movie about his life is planned and scheduled to be released in 2021.<sup>14</sup> Hopefully this will spread knowledge about him and his story among a wider range of people.

However, we should not forget that Pilecki was not alone. There were a lot of men behind his organization, who we do not know of but who were equally responsible for its success. Pilecki should be seen more as a symbol of bravery and patriotic love for his country and people.

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<sup>13</sup>“Poland in 1945” <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/poland-in-1945>

<sup>14</sup> “Austrian director to make movie about Witold Pilecki”

<https://polandin.com/46143501/austrian-director-to-make-movie-about-witold-pilecki>

#### 4 Abbreviations

SS	‘Schutzstaffel’, was originally established as Adolf Hitler’s personal safety unit. It later became both the elite guard of the Nazi Reich and Hitler’s executive force allowed to carry out all security-related duties, without regard for legal restraint.
TAP	Tajna Armia Polska – the Polish secret army
KZ	Concentration Camp

#### 5 List of characters

Fritz Seidler	An SS soldier, who became second Camp Head in November 1941 until he was transferred to the KZ Mauthausen-Gusen.
Thomasz Seranfiński	A lawyer, whose identity card Witold Pilecki found in a house, in which he was hiding, and used to register himself with in the camp.
Helena Stupka	A civilian who lived in the nearby town Oświęcim. She and her son Jacek Stupka helped the resistance.
Wladyslaw Surmacki	He was Chief of Staff of TAP in Warsaw and was imprisoned in 1940 and because of his surveyor engineering degree he worked in the construction office in Auschwitz. He became one of the leading heads of the resistance in the camp.
Wladyslaw Dering	A fellow member of the resistance. Because he was a gynecologist he worked as a nurse, later as a

doctor, in the hospital. He became one of the leading heads of the resistance in the camp.

Max Popiersch

He was SS-Hauptsturmführer and in charge of the hospital until he got transferred to the KZ Majdanek.

Witold Kosztowny

A resistance member who got recruited by Pilecki in 1940 and bred infected lice, which were thrown on clothes of SS guards.

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**7 Affidavit****Eidesstattliche Erklärung**

“Ich erkläre hiermit, dass ich die Seminararbeit ohne fremde Hilfe angefertigt und nur die im Literaturverzeichnis angeführten Quellen und Hilfsmittel benützt habe.”

Haßfurt, den

Ort

Datum

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Unterschrift