

POLSKI UNIWERSYTET NA OBCZYŻNIE
W LONDYNIE

ZESZYTY NAUKOWE

SERIA TRZECIA, NR 4, 2016

MICHAEL FLEMING

POLISH UNIVERSITY ABROAD, LONDON

WITOLD PILECKI:
VOLUNTEER FOR AUSCHWITZ?

One of the central tenets of the narrative both popular and scholarly about Witold Pilecki, member of Tajna Armia Polska (TAP, Secret Polish Army) and participant in the Warsaw Rising of 1944, who was executed on the orders of the Warsaw Regional Voivodship Court in 1948, and posthumously awarded the Order Orła Białego (Order of the White Eagle) in 2006, is that he volunteered to go to Auschwitz in 1940. The respected historian Józef Garliński, who first brought Pilecki's activities to widespread public attention, contended in his important 1975 book *Fighting Auschwitz* that Pilecki

proposed to his commander that he should be assigned a new task... to go [to Auschwitz] in order to organise the prisoners, look for means of resistance and mutual assistance, and send reports to Warsaw¹.

In *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki* from 1997, historians Adam Cyra and Wiesław Wysocki do not indicate who conceived the idea of entering Auschwitz to organise prisoners and report conditions to the Polish Government in London, but argue that

¹ J. Garliński, *Fighting Auschwitz. The resistance movement in the concentration camp*, London, 1975, p. 11. It is worth noting that Garliński spoke about Pilecki during a conversation with Piotr Jarecki in a 1985 Radio Free Europe broadcast. „Witold Pilecki: Zapomniany bohater”, 5 April 1985, Radio Free Europe, available at internet site: [Zolnierzewykleci.polskieradio.pl/zrwe](http://zolnierzewykleci.polskieradio.pl/zrwe), last accessed 29 IV 2016.

the second lieutenant „Witold” volunteered to carry out that task, with the acknowledgement of the TAP commander. Also Col. Tadeusz Pełczyński, the head of ZWZ intelligence service, knew about Pilecki’s volunteering to go to Auschwitz².

Wiesław Wysocki in his 2009 book *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki 1901–1948* claims that it was Pilecki’s own idea to go Auschwitz³.

„Witold’s Report”, written by Pilecki during his stay in Italy in 1945 and passed to (then General) Tadeusz Pełczyński in October 1945, is one of the sources to which Józef Garliński refers, but the books written by Wysocki, and Cyra and Wysocki, do not give precise references since they are pitched to a general audience, so it is not clear what primary material supports their assertions⁴. However, it is **not** possible from reading „Witold’s Report” to claim that the idea of going to Auschwitz was Pilecki’s own idea, and there is evidence suggesting that Pilecki was pressured to accept a mission to get into a camp.

The precise sequence of events leading to Pilecki getting himself arrested in Warsaw in September 1940 has remained surprisingly poorly understood and this is both of historical interest and, increasingly, public concern, given the prominence that Pilecki now has in the popular memory of the Second World War. In 2000, Adam Cyra’s *Ochotnik do Auschwitz: Witold Pilecki 1901–1948 (Volunteer for Auschwitz: Witold Pilecki 1901–1948)* provided much needed detail on the events leading to Pilecki’s arrest, though sixteen years on, this knowledge has not yet impacted on the popular story of Pilecki⁵. *Ochotnik do Auschwitz* is a rich and fully

² A. Cyra, W. J. Wysocki, *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki*, Warszawa, 1997, p. 61.

³ W. J. Wysocki, *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki 1901–1948*, Warszawa, 2009, p. 45. Wysocki writes: *Pilecki would have an in-depth talk with Major Włodarkiewicz, in which he suggested the creation of a resistance network in the Auschwitz camp. He tried to convince Włodarkiewicz to hand over TAP affairs to another officer and allow him to go to KL Auschwitz. Their first conversation did not yield results. Włodarkiewicz told Pilecki to rethink the issue. Pilecki however remained adamant and would not cease in his attempts to persuade Włodarkiewicz until the Major granted him the permission he longed for.* Since Wysocki does not provide references, it is not clear on what basis he makes these assertions. Pilecki’s own testimony contradicts Wysocki’s claims.

⁴ „Witold’s Report” has been available online for some time and has recently been translated and published in English by Jarek Garliński; see: W. Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, transl. by J. Garliński, Los Angeles, 2012. Józef Garliński also refers to a report written by Władysław Dering and an account written by Pilecki’s daughter, Zofia. In his introduction to „Witold’s Report” Jarek Garliński refers to Pilecki as *having volunteered to get himself arrested*; see J. Garliński, *Historical Horizon*, in: W. Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer...*, p. XVIII. „Witold’s Report” of 1945 should not be confused with „Raport W”, which was written by Pilecki shortly after he escaped from Auschwitz in April 1943.

⁵ A. Cyra, *Ochotnik do Auschwitz. Witold Pilecki 1901–1948*, Oświęcim, 2000.

referenced work which draws on a wide variety of material written by Pilecki himself, some of which has not yet been published. It discusses the pressures applied to Pilecki to accept the mission to organise resistance in a camp, though the title of the book may have had the unfortunate effect of sustaining a view which Cyra's own research has shown to be erroneous.

Cyra drew on a range of documents, including those relating to Pilecki's interrogation while in custody in 1947. On 18 June 1947 Pilecki stated that:

I would like to clarify that Major Jan Włodarkiewicz persuaded me to take this step by declaring that he had mentioned my name to Colonel Rowecki, pseudonym „Grot”, who was at the time Commandant in Chief of the ZWZ [Union for Armed Struggle], as someone who would agree to enter any camp and organise resistance activity⁶ [underlining – M. F.].

The meeting between General Stefan „Grot” Rowecki, the leader of the Underground army in Nazi-occupied Poland, and Major Jan Włodarkiewicz, a member of TAP and Pilecki's superior, took place in early August 1940⁷.

Another important document to which Cyra refers is the 15 page introductory part of an incomplete memoir written by Pilecki. Cyra received it from Pilecki's son, Andrzej. This document is currently held at the archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and is untitled⁸. However, a copy of the same document is held at the Polish Underground Movement (1939–1945) Study Trust in London. In this text, Pilecki provides further details of the pressure applied to him to take the mission to get into a camp. Włodarkiewicz informed Pilecki: *Well, you've been honoured, I mentioned your name to „Grot” as the only officer who will achieve this⁹.*

The text at the Study Trust includes annotation seemingly handwritten by Pilecki, which shines fresh light on Pilecki's motivation and sentiment about the mission to set up resistance in a camp¹⁰. This document, entitled „W jaki sposób znalazłem się w Oświęcimiu” („How I found myself in Auschwitz”), was written

⁶ Ibid., p. 60–61: *Wyjaśniam, że do tego kroku nakłonił mnie mjr Włodarkiewicz Jan przez oświadczenie mi, że wymienił on moje nazwisko przed płk. Roweckim ps. „Grot”, który był wówczas głównym komendantem ZWZ, jako człowieka, który zdecydowałby się wejść do pierwszego z brzegu obozu i zorganizować pracę konspiracyjną.*

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12. The document can be found at: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Wspomnienia, t. 179, W. Pilecki, wspomnienia od dzieciństwa do września 1940 r. (bez tytułu), k. 1–15.

⁹ Polish Underground Movement (1939–1945) Study Trust, BI6991, Witold Pilecki: W jaki sposób znalazłem się w Oświęcimiu, p. 15: *No, spotkał Ciebie zaszczyt, Twoje nazwisko wymieniłem u „Grot” jako jedyne go oficera, który tego dokona.*

¹⁰ Ibid.

by Pilecki (the document is undated) in the third person. It may have been passed to General Tadeusz Pełczyński at the same time as „Witold’s Report” – Pilecki’s account of Auschwitz – in October 1945. It seems that this annotated document has been overlooked by scholars working on Pilecki. Garliński, for example, does not refer to it in his book *Fighting Auschwitz* and this may have been because he did not have access to it.

Indeed, it is worth noting that despite Pełczyński making Garliński aware of Pilecki’s report in the 1960s, Garliński had to persuade Pełczyński to allow him to make reference to „Witold’s Report” in his book. Pełczyński considered „Witold’s Report” to be under his personal disposition. It was only after a meeting at the Polish Underground Movement Study Trust (SPP), which Pełczyński organised to take place on 15th December 1969 and to which he invited Garliński, and Władysław Bartoszewski to act as a moderator, that Garliński secured Pełczyński’s agreement to be able to refer to Pilecki’s report (i.e. „Witold’s Report”)¹¹. In short, a key barrier to Pilecki’s story becoming publically known was in London, not just in Warsaw as has often been suggested.

Pilecki’s response to his assignment is revealed in two different documents. In „How I found myself in Auschwitz”, Pilecki handwrites his sentiments in the margin of his typewritten text:

Witold was not all that keen on the project. But TAP as an independent organisation was coming to an end. The position taken up by Witold himself shattered [the] ambitions [of TAP’s leadership to remain as an independent organisation]¹².

Here Pilecki highlights an aspect of the increasing political dissonance within TAP during the summer of 1940. In addition, he records that Jan Włodarkiewicz wished recruits to TAP to take an oath which expressed a particular ideological position. Pilecki was in favour of accepting anyone who sought the independence of Poland. In „How I found myself in Auschwitz” Pilecki writes about himself in the third person:

Wishing to swear in as many good Poles as possible, he did not wish to introduce into the [resistance] work any elements which would divide them. He approached people apolitically and swore them in on a military level only, explaining that party interests should be

¹¹ Polish Underground Movement (1939–1945) Study Trust, Kol. 13/82, Pełczyński’s correspondence with Garliński.

¹² Polish Underground Movement (1939–1945) Study Trust, BI6991, Witold Pilecki: W jaki sposób znalazłem się w Oświęcimiu, p. 15: *Tak bardzo Witold się nie zachwycił tym projektem. Lecz TAP kończył się jako samodzielna organizacja. Stanowisko, jakie zajął sam Witold, było przekreśleniem ambicji.*

*left for a time after independence had been [re]gained. This approach allowed the swearing in of many people whose main concern was for the freedom of Poland*¹³.

It seems that Włodarkiewicz wished to exclude those who did not share his particular political (nationalist) sensibilities¹⁴. Cyra convincingly argues that Pilecki's lack of enthusiasm for Włodarkiewicz's restrictive ordinance, and disagreements regarding TAP's integration with the Union for Armed Struggle (ZWZ) (Pilecki was in favour), were important factors in encouraging Włodarkiewicz to remove Pilecki from Warsaw¹⁵.

In „How I found myself in Auschwitz”, Pilecki notes that his aim to integrate TAP into the ZWZ (the Union for Armed Struggle had been sanctioned by General Sikorski) went directly against the ambitions of TAP's leadership:

*In the spring of 1940 Witold and his friend „Jeź” manage to reach the leadership of ZWZ and finally see for themselves General Sikorski's authorisation. From this time onwards Witold aims to integrate TAP into ZWZ, which requires going against the ambitions of TAP's leadership*¹⁶.

Pilecki also points out that Włodarkiewicz spent a long time working on his version of the oath of allegiance, and that he'd been counting on Pilecki's support. The lack of this support offended Włodarkiewicz:

¹³ Ibid.: *Chcąc związać możliwie większą ilość dobrych Polaków nie chciał wprowadzać do pracy jakichkolwiek momentów, któreby ich różniły. Podchodził do ludzi apartyjnie i wiązał na płaszczyźnie tylko żołnierskiej, tłumacząc, że interesy partyjne należy zostawić na czas po zdobyciu niepodległości. Takie podejście umożliwiło związanie wielu ludzi, którzy mieli na myśli przedewszystkim wolność Polski.* For Pilecki, it seems that the phrase 'good Pole' was inclusive, referring to those prepared to fight for a free Poland.

¹⁴ Włodarkiewicz played a significant role in the Konfederacja Narodu (Confederation of the Nation), founded in September 1940. On 7th October 1940 this organisation issued a declaration outlining goals and objectives. The authoritarian, Catholic and antisemitic vision of the Confederation of the Nation was promulgated through its publication *Nowa Polska* – the editor in chief being the fascist Bolesław Piasecki. This group did not recognise the authority of the Sikorski government, though it agreed to co-operate with the Union for Armed Struggle; see: M. Kunicki, *Between the Brown and the Red: Nationalism, Catholicism, and Communism in 20th century Poland. The politics of Bolesław Piasecki*, Athens (Ohio), 2012, p. 60.

¹⁵ A. Cyra, *Ochotnik do Auschwitz...*, p. 60.

¹⁶ Polish Underground Movement (1939–1945) Study Trust, BI6991, Witold Pilecki: *W jaki sposób znalazłem się w Oświęcimiu*, p. 14: *Wiosną 40-go roku Witoldowi razem z przyjaciелеm „Jeź”-em udaje się dotrzeć do góry Z.W.Z.-tu i widzieć nareszcie upoważnienie gen. Sikorskiego. Od tej chwili Witold dąży do podporządkowania T.A.P.-u Z.W.Z.-owi, co wymaga przekreślenia ambicji góry org. T.A.P.-u.*

And so the introduction of such a declaration [oath of allegiance] would constitute the breaking up of the [resistance] work from the inside, a fact that „Witold” pointed out at one of the meetings, organised by „Jan” for the purpose of discussing and approving the declaration he’d been working on. And it was „Witold” that Jan had been counting on the most... This gave rise to deep resentment¹⁷.

„How I found myself in Auschwitz” also allows fruitful re-readings of „Witold’s Report”. In the report Pilecki suggests that he felt pressured to some degree to take up the mission. He writes:

There flashed in my mind some words of Janek W. [Major Jan Włodarkiewicz], spoken to me after the first street round-up (August [1940]) in Warsaw: „So, you see, you missed such a good opportunity – people caught in the street are not charged with any political case – this is the safest way to get into a camp”¹⁸.

Later in „Witold’s Report”, when writing about being in Auschwitz, Pilecki records that he received a message from Warsaw which revealed that Włodarkiewicz, pricked by his conscience, was asking everyone why Pilecki went to the camp¹⁹. This message, summarised in „Witold’s Report”, points to the seemingly bad faith of Włodarkiewicz. When Pilecki’s family inquired about organising a bribe to get Pilecki out of the camp, Włodarkiewicz stated that there was no money available for such a course of action.

The strongest claim that can be made on the basis of available sources is that Pilecki allowed himself to be arrested in order to get into a camp, a position not too far from Cyra’s contention in *Ochotnik do Auschwitz*. In his preface to Garliński’s book, Michael Foot, the official historian of the Special Operations Executive, ar-

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15: *Wprowadzenie więc deklaracji takiej było by rozbijaniem roboty od wewnątrz, co też „Witold” oświadczył na jednym z zebrań, zorganizowanym przez „Jana” celem przedyskutowania i zatwierdzenia opracowanej deklaracji. A Jan na „Witolda” właśnie najwięcej liczył... Powstała głębsza uraza.*

¹⁸ See A. Cyra, *Ochotnik do Auschwitz...*, p. 267: *W głowie zabłyśły mi słowa Janka W. [major Jan Włodarkiewicz], wyrzeczone do mnie po pierwszej łapance (sierpień [1940]) w Warszawie: „O, widzisz, nie skorzystałeś z tak dobrej okazji – ludziom złapanym na ulicy nie zarzucają żadnej sprawy politycznej – w ten sposób najbezpieczniej można się dostać do obozu.*

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 316: *And so I wrote to my family, without being able to reveal my work, that I really was fine here, that they should not bring up my case, that I wanted to remain here until the end. Fate would decide whether I would be able to get out, etc. By return I received the response that Janek W. [Włodarkiewicz], who – once he found out where I was – was plagued by a guilty conscience, kept asking everyone: „Why did he go?” But he was consistent and informed my family, who had asked for help in paying for my release, that there was no money available to this end. Pilecki did not wish to be bought out of the camp, but Włodarkiewicz ensured that he wasn’t.*

gues that Pilecki *let himself be arrested by the Germans, in the deliberate hope that he would be sent to Auschwitz*²⁰. It would have been more accurate for Foot to have written *in the deliberate hope that he would be sent to a camp*. For Foot, Pilecki was a heroic figure. In the final analysis it seems that Pilecki's mission – to get into a camp and set up resistance – was negotiated between Pilecki and his superiors. Pilecki agreed to the task, under some pressure. Once arrested by the occupying Germans, Pilecki had no choice as to where he would be incarcerated – there was no 'volunteering' for Auschwitz. Viewing the decision to go to a camp as a pressurized negotiation between Pilecki and his superiors provides insight into Pilecki's character and into the relationships within part of the Underground at this particular point in time.

There were significant political reasons within the TAP leadership to remove Pilecki from Warsaw. First, he was in favour of a swift merger of TAP into the structures of the Union for Armed Struggle, the resistance organisation linked to the Sikorski Polish Government in Exile (at this point, already in London). Włodarkiewicz wished TAP to remain independent, and harboured anti-Sikorski sentiments. Second, Włodarkiewicz supported a restrictive notion of Polishness which manifested itself in his desire for an exclusionary oath of allegiance. With Pilecki removed from Warsaw, Włodarkiewicz was able to liaise to some degree with the Union of Armed Struggle, but maintain some distance from Sikorski's government through the *Konfederacja Narodu* (Confederation of the Nation). In short, Pilecki seems to have been outmanoeuvred, and Włodarkiewicz was able to pursue his particular ethno-centric ambitions with colleagues, including the nationalist and antisemitic Bolesław Piasecki, in the Confederation of the Nation.

„How I found myself in Auschwitz” is important for several reasons. The document reveals more details of how Pilecki came to allow himself to be arrested, and provides further insight into the man himself. It also offers a cautionary message to those who make use of history in their socio-political lives. In recent years, Pilecki's reputation has soared and been mythologised, as his story is parleyed in the seemingly unending conflicts over the memory and history of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. For some he is conceptualised as a heroic martyr²¹. „How I found myself in Auschwitz” highlights the political manoeuvrings which led to Pilecki allowing himself to be arrested, and undermines the ongoing attempt by the Polish national right to co-opt his history to their exclusionary and

²⁰ M. Foot, *Foreword*, in: J. Garliński, *Fighting Auschwitz...*, p. 2.

²¹ Jacek Pawłowicz, in a 2008 book *Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki 1901–1948*, published by the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (Institute of National Remembrance), casts the net of responsibility for Pilecki's execution wide and contends that Pilecki was (judicially) murdered by (at least) 17 people.

ethnocentric agenda. Pilecki's writings suggest that he was a patriot, not a nationalist. Pilecki was well aware that his actions during the Second World War could be co-opted for particular purposes. On the first page of „How I found myself in Auschwitz” Pilecki humorously and presciently writes directly to the mythmakers. In a handwritten annotation he declares that „How I found myself in Auschwitz” is:

*Written for those colleagues who write novels about me ascribing to me it seems feats at the Battle of Kirchholm or Grunwald (in this framework only may you fib, my colleagues/friends)*²².

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²² Polish Underground Movement (1939–1945) Study Trust, BI6991, Witold Pilecki: W jaki sposób znalazłem się w Oświęcimiu, p. 15: *Napisane dla tych kolegów, co piszą o mnie powieści, przypisując mnie wyczyny zdaje się w bitwie Kirchholmskiej czy pod Grunwaldem (w tych ramach tylko możecie, koledzy, bujać).*

MICHAEL FLEMING

WITOLD PILECKI: OCHOTNIK DO AUSCHWITZ?

STRESZCZENIE

Autor idzie śladem historyka Adama Cyry w problematyzowaniu twierdzenia, że Witold Pilecki poszedł „na ochotnika” do Auschwitz. Korzysta z 15-stronicowego dokumentu, zatytułowanego „W jaki sposób znalazłem się w Oświęcimiu”, napisanego przez Pileckiego, który zawiera szczegóły dotychczas pomijane przez naukowców. Autor zwraca uwagę na spory wewnątrz Tajnej Armii Polskiej, dotyczące wcielenia jej do Związku Walki Zbrojnej i restrykcyjnej przysięgi na wierność, uznając je za ważne czynniki, które zachęciły zwierzchnika Pileckiego – Jana Włodarkiewicza – do przekonania go, aby podjął się misji zorganizowania grupy oporu w obozie. Okoliczności, jakie doprowadziły do tego, że Pilecki dał się aresztować, rzucają światło na polityczne rozgrywki w lecie 1940 roku, toczące się wśród części polskiego podziemia.

Słowa klucze: Witold Pilecki, Auschwitz, ochotnik