

Article 14

Prof. Józef Garlinski, The Polish Underground Movement i Auschwitz Concentration Camp

On 14th June 1940 the Germans entered Paris and that very same day the gates to a German extermination camp were opened at Auschwitz. The first transport of 728 prisoners was made up exclusively of Polish prisoners, predominantly young men who had been caught trying to get to France, where a new Polish Army was being formed.

Later on transports were arriving not only from Poland but from many other countries, so that ultimately the inmates of Auschwitz represented as many as 30 nations. The number of those who were registered and received their individual prisoner numbers exceeded 500 thousand, but many more transports of Jews went straight to the gas chamber unregistered. Over the years 1942, 1943 and 1944 their number reached 1.5 million.

In September 1940 Lt Witold Pilecki arrived at the camp in a transport of prisoners from Warsaw. He was a member of the 'Secret Polish Army' (which later became part of the Polish Home Army – AK) who had deliberately allowed himself to be taken in a street roundup and thus be sent to Auschwitz, where he planned to set up an underground organisation. He arrived at the camp with false papers and was known there as Tomasz Serafinski.

In a report he wrote after the war the aims of his mission were summarised as follows:
'The setting up of a military organisation within the camp for the purposes of:

- keeping up the morale among fellow inmates and supplying them with news from the outside
- providing extra food and distributing clothing among organization members
- preparing our own detachments to take over the camp in the eventuality of the dropping of arms or of a live force [i.e. paratroops]'

Pilecki's secret organization, which he called the 'Union of Military Organization', was composed of cells of five prisoners who were unknown to one another with one man designated to be their commander. These cells were to be found mainly in the camp hospital and camp work allocation office.

Once the first cells were established, contact with Warsaw became essential. It so happened that at the time, by exceptionally fortuitous circumstances, a prisoner was released from the camp who was able to take Pilecki's first report. Later reports were smuggled out by civilian workers employed in the camp. Another means was through prisoners who had decided to escape.

Meanwhile, other Poles were forming their own organizations that had similar aims to Pilecki's. It was therefore necessary for these to unite, and so on Christmas Eve 1941, when the SS quite extraordinarily left the inmates unattended in their quarters but nonetheless still under great danger, a meeting was held in Block No. 25. The several Polish underground groups represented there included the socialists, nationalists and moderates. The meeting was a success: there were no betrayals and mutual understanding and cooperation were achieved.

Col. Kazimierz Rawicz, known in the camp as Jan Hilkner, became the overall commander of these groups. When in mid 1942 he was transferred to another concentration camp, his place was taken by Group-Captain Juliusz Gilewicz.

Apart from the Poles, other national groups began to set up their own resistance organizations. In January 1942 Pilecki established contact with Jan Stranski, the leader of the Czech group. That same year he also established contact with the Russians and later also with the French and Austrians.

The socialist Józef Cyrankiewicz was brought to the camp in September 1942. Although still relatively young at 31, he had far reaching ambitions. He joined the underground PPS and thus also became a member of Pilecki's organization. Cyrankiewicz met Pilecki personally on a number of occasions.

In the autumn of 1942 the SS uncovered part of the Polish underground network, arrests followed and around 50 prisoners were executed.

From the very start Pilecki's principal aim was to take over Auschwitz concentration camp and free all the prisoners. He envisaged achieving this by having Home Army detachments attacking from the outside while cadre members of his Union of Military Organization, numbering around a thousand prisoners, would start a revolt from within. All his reports primarily concerned this matter. However, the Home Army High Command was less optimistic and did not believe such an operation to be viable while the Eastern Front was still far away.

Pilecki therefore felt it necessary to present his plans personally. This meant that he would have to escape from the camp, which he succeeded in doing with two other prisoners on 27th April 1943. Before the breakout Pilecki passed on his position within the camp organization to fellow inmate Henryk Bartoszewicz. However, neither his subsequent report nor the fact that he presented it in person altered the high command's opinion.

Meantime, in May 1943 the communists set up their own network in Auschwitz. The initiative of uniting all the small groups came from the Austrian [communists], who included barely a hundred prisoners, but usually ones holding good posts in the camp. They established contact with the French and the Polish socialists, who were now led by Cyrankiewicz.

Thus a new organization was formed: the *Kampfgruppe* Auschwitz, which was headed by an Austrian [communist], but also included in the command structure the extremely ambitious Cyrankiewicz. A very important point in this group's ideological declaration related to the situation on the Eastern Front and stated that: 'Friendship with the Soviet Union is the guarantee of victory and peace.'

The *Kampfgruppe*, however, lacked any real power without broader support from the Poles, who included the vast majority of the main camp's inmates. Therefore it was essential to reach an understanding with Pilecki's organisation. Talks ended successfully in the spring of 1944 with the founding of the Camp Military Council, headed by Henryk Bartoszewicz and Bernard Świerszczyna from Pilecki's organization and Józef Cyrankiewicz and Herman Langbein from the *Kampfgruppe*. The plan was to take over the camp and the agreement was therefore put at the disposal of the Home Army Silesia District commander.

There was also a strong group of Russian prisoners who maintained contact with the Union of Military Organization and were prepared to fight, but remained independent.

The only circumstance under which the Home Army High Command would agree to an open revolt in Auschwitz was if the SS began murdering all the prisoners, but that eventuality never occurred. And it was only Pilecki's organization which maintained contact with the Home Army partisans in the area around the camp.

The SS began evacuating Auschwitz on 17th January 1945. They drove most of the prisoners west on foot, while leaving behind several thousand prisoners who were deemed too sick to go. When on 27th January Red Army detachments took over its compound, the 1,680-day history of Auschwitz concentration camp ended.

After many vicissitudes Witold Pilecki found himself in post-war Poland on a mission for the Polish Second Corps stationed in Italy. In 1948 he was arrested by the Polish People's Republic authorities and charged with being 'a paid agent of Gen. Anders's intelligence network'. He was subsequently tried, sentenced to death and executed. Meantime Józef Cyrankiewicz, who had returned to Poland [after his liberation from Mauthausen concentration camp], put the PPS under the control of Bolesław Bierut, Stalin's appointed leader of Poland, and went on to become Poland's prime minister, a job he was to hold for 20 years. In those years Cyrankiewicz let it be known in Poland that it was he who founded the resistance movement in Auschwitz.

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