

Witold Pilecki

(1901-1948)

Witold Pilecki was born in 1901 in Olonets in Russian Karelia. His family had been living in Russia since the January Uprising (1863); following its fall, Witold's grandfather was exiled to Siberia and the family estates were confiscated.

Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki



In 1910, the Pilecki family returned to Wilno. At the age of 13, Witold joined the clandestine Polish Scouting and Guiding Association. He was also a member of the Polish Military Organization. In 1918, he volunteered for the Self-Defense of Lithuania, where he achieved the rank of uhlan.

Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki





Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki

In 1920, he took part in the Polish-Soviet War in the rank of senior uhlans. He fought in the Battle of Warsaw (13–25 August 1920), one of the most decisive battles in world history. Witold's steadfastness was duly noted; he was twice awarded a Cross of Valor.

In the 1920s, he began to study art in Wilno, but had to quit due to the family's poor financial situation. He took a job instead, and made efforts to recover the family estate in Sukurcze (now in Belarus).

In 1926, the Pilecki family were able to reclaim their ruined property.



Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki

Witold immediately set about modernizing the estate. Over a few years, he not only restored it, but also transformed it into a buoyant dairy and agricultural center.

Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki



Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki



At the same time, he did not abandon his social and military activities. In 1926, he attained the rank of second lieutenant in the reserves and was assigned to the 26th Regiment of Wielkopolska Uhlans.





Photo. <https://biogramy.ipn.gov.pl/bio/wszystkie-biogramy/106001,Rotmistrz-Witold-Pilecki.html>

Był również człowiekiem bardzo He was also a man of great artistic ability. He painted beautifully; two of his paintings can still be admired in a church in Krupa (now in Belarus).

Witold Pilecki played the piano, took photographs and wrote both prose and verse – among others a poem about his family estate in Sukurcze. He loved nature.



In 1931, he married a teacher from nearby Krupa – Maria Ostrowska. Their son, Andrzej, was born a year later, and their daughter, Zofia, in 1933.



Witold Pilecki helped animate the local community; everything went well until the end of August 1939.

On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, thus starting World War II.

On 17 September 1939, the Soviet Union attacked Poland from the east.

Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki





Photo. Wikimedia Commons

Witold Pilecki participated in the military effort from the very start: he fought in the September Campaign and continued to battle the German occupier after Poland's surrender.

In as early as November 1939, he co-created an underground military organization: the Secret Polish Army. It was there that a decision was made that led to Witold Pilecki volunteering to be imprisoned in the Auschwitz camp.



Photo. Marzenna Szymańska



On 19 September 1940, Witold Pilecki allowed himself to be captured by the Germans and deported to Auschwitz. He was using a false identity at the time, and was thus taken as Tomasz Serafiński in his sister-in-law's apartment at Wojska Polskiego Avenue in Warsaw.

Witold Pilecki was the only volunteer to Auschwitz. He went there on a secret mission: to describe the situation at the camp, establish a resistance movement and prepare for the eventuality of rising up against the German torturers and taking control of the camp.

Photo. <https://biogramy.ipn.gov.pl/bio/wszystkie-biogramy/106001,Rotmistrz-Witold-Pilecki.html>





ROTMISTRZ
WITOLD
PILECKI

13 V 1901-25 V 1948

OCHOTNIK DO AUSCHWITZ
JEDEN Z NAJODWAŻNIEJSZYCH
ŻOŁNIERZY II WOJNY ŚWIATOWEJ

fot. Marzenna Szymańska

Photo: Marzenna Szymańska (inscription on the monument: Cavalry Captain Witold Pilecki, 13 May 1901 – 25 May 1948, volunteer to Auschwitz, one of the bravest soldiers of World War II)

A monument to Witold Pilecki now stands in the neighborhood where he was captured, reminding us of his mission and incredible courage.

Name and surname – indeed, the very humanity of the prisoners – were irrelevant at Auschwitz. People were just numbers. Witold Pilecki arrived at the camp as the 4,859th prisoner and was thus assigned number 4859.

Photo: <https://biogramy.ipn.gov.pl/bio/wszystkie-biogramy/106001,Rotmistrz-Witold-Pilecki.html>



Photo: <https://biogramy.ipn.gov.pl/bio/wszystkie-biogramy/106001,Rotmistrz-Witold-Pilecki.html>

Despite the intolerable cruelty of the camp life, Witold Pilecki did not give up. He set to the task of establishing a clandestine resistance movement composed of so-called “fives”, i.e. groups of five people.

He also formed the underground Military Organization Union.

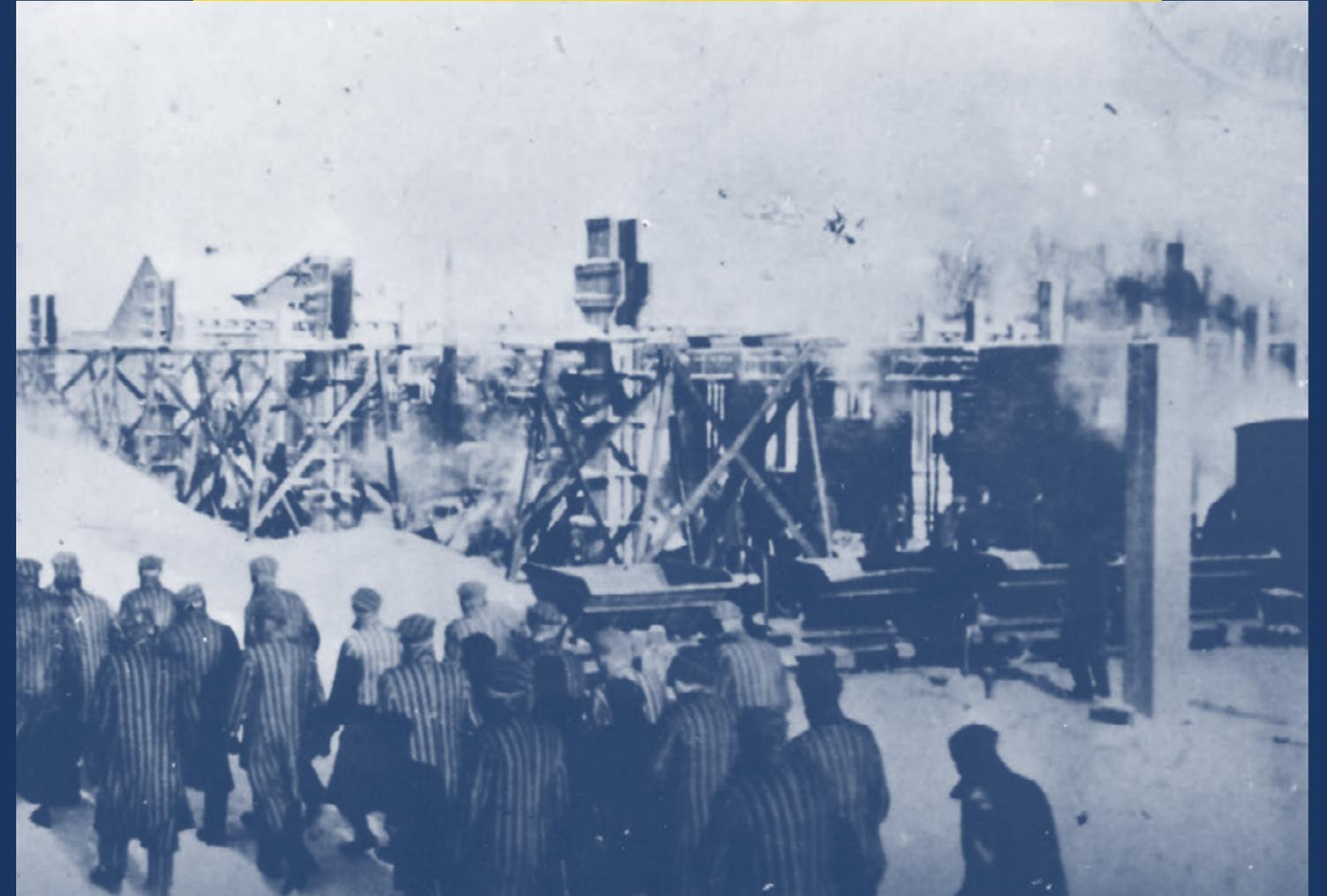
Photo. Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum



His goal was to offer moral support and other assistance to fellow prisoners, organize sabotage and – most importantly – document German crimes.

In this way, Witold Pilecki became a witness to the Holocaust.

Photo. Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum





His reports from the camp, delivered to the London-based Polish government-in-exile in an oral form by special couriers, were passed on to the Allies.

Witold Pilecki recommended the bombing of the camp in as early as 1940.

" RAPORT W. " 35 68

W dniach 14, 15 i 16 września 1939 r. na rozkaz gen. l. przez maj. 3. zorganizowałem we Włodawie Oddział konny - 185 koni i pieszy - ponad 100 ludzi. Dnia 16 września przyjechał do Włodawy officer tej samej co ja brygady, sterczy stopniem i mój przyjaciel maj. 3., któremu ustąpiłem dowództwa nad Oddziałem.

Z oddziałem tym trwaliśmy "konno i zbrojnie w różnych terminach" do dnia 17 października 1939 r., a historię tegoż upamiętnili już moi młodzi koledzy.

Oddział ten był zaczątkiem Organizacji T.A.P., którą założyliśmy w Warszawie w pierwszej połowie listopada 1939 r.

W Warszawie pracowałem jako szef sztabu TAP-u od listopada 1939 r. do maja 1940 r. i następnie od maja 1940 r. jako inspektor główny TAP-u /nom de guerre "Witold". Dążyłem do wcielenia TAP-u do ZWZ-u. Miałem z tym trudności. Rozbił się zespół /św. św. żyjący: 4, 41 i mjr 52/. Decyzja dn. 19.9.40 r. /św. 5./.

W TRZECIAJ ROZDZIAŁ I STWIERDZIENIA OBOZU W OŚWIECIMIU - RAPORT O PRACY TYCH KTOŹY - W LIPCU 1940 R. - POZA DROGĄ UDREŻEN W TYM PIKLE - PRZECHODZIŁ JESZCZE LUFĘ KOMINA KREMATORIUM - ZAMIANIAJĄC SIĘ, ZGODNIE Z NASZYM OKREŚLENIM, - W "DYMKI", "OBROZKI", "WIELEKI".

M.p. wymienionych w raporcie Pracowników Organizacji Wojskowej w Oświęcimiu.
/Stan w chwili opuszczenia przez mnie Obozu/.

Zamordowany podczas badania plut. 22.

Rozstrzelani: 11, ptk. 20, ptk. 21, por. 28, por. 34 - /TAP/, ppor. rez. 35, 37 - /TAP/, ppor. rez. 43, pdkh. rez. 48, por. 51, 63, 71, mjr. 73, por. rez. 78 - /TAP/, rtm. 79, por. 80, kpt. 101, dr. kpt. 104, pdkh. rez. 116, kpr. 117 - /TAP/, kpt. 129 - /TAP/, 130 - /TAP/, 143, 144 - /TAP/, 155, 163, 176, st. ud. 183, plut. 186.

Wykoleczeni zastrzykiem: marynara 133, 177, 199.

Zmarli: 1/ Zabici na placu, 2/ z powodu warunków i 3/ chorób obozu: rtm. rez. 10 - /TAP/, 12 kpt. 13, kpt. 33, 62, 64, 66, 107, pdkh. rez. 111 - /TAP/, mjr. 112 - /TAP/, 113 - /TAP/, 114 - /TAP/, plt. 118, plt. 119, 125, st. sierż. 131 - /TAP/, prof. 136, 138, 139, 140, 145, 158, 159, pdkh. rez. 160 - /TAP/, 165, 168, rtm. 184, 194, 207.

Zwolnieni przez władze lagru: 6, kpr. 15, ppor. rez. 65, pdkh. 68, dr. 69.

Zwolnieni przez władze - pojechali z meldunkiem od Org. - ptk. 8 - /TAP/, kpt. 24, sierż. 25 pow. rez. 26 i 53.

Wzwięziony jako chory do Dachau /organizowane/: 108 - /TAP/.

Wzwięzieni transportami do innych lagrów: 14, 18, plut. 23, ptk. 29, ppor. 40, ptk. 44, pdkh. rez. 49, pdkh. rez. 51, 55, 59, kpt. 73, 93 - /TAP/, 94, 95, 100, ppor. rez. 102, ks. 105, 200, 132 - /TAP/, 134, 141, 142, 151, 153, 154, dr. 162 - /TAP/, 170, 178, 181, 196, 208 - /TAP/.

Rozwziętnie umiędzili się w transporcie celem dokonania ucieczki w drodze: ptk. 45 i pdkh. 16 przez którego przeszedł meldunek.

Zastrzeleni podczas dokonania ucieczki: plt. 127 - /TAP/, por. rez. 128 - /TAP/.

Wyszli z obozu za pomocą ucieczki zorganizowanej z meldunkiem od Org.: 36, 41 - /TAP/, pdkh. 46, ppor. rez. 54, ppor. rez. 81, 82 oraz moja osoba - /TAP/.

Przetrwali jeszcze w Obozie: dr. 9 - /TAP/, pdkh. rez. 17, pdkh. 19, plut. 27, ptk. 30, ppor. rez. 31, ppor. rez. 32, 38, kpt. 39, ppor. rez. 47, pdkh. rez. 50, mjr. 52 - /TAP/, pdkh. rez. 56, 57, 58, 60, 67, ptk. 72, kpt. 74, 76, 77, 83, dr. 84, por. rez. 85, ppor. rez. 86, ppor. 87, ppor. rez. 88, 89, pdkh. rez. 90, 91, 96, 97, 98, 99, wchm. 103, 106, 109, 110 - /TAP/, 115 - /TAP/, plt. 121, ptk. 122, por. 123, sierż. 124, maryn. 126, kpt. 135, 137, kpt. 147, 148, 149, 150 - /TAP/, 152, 156, 157, dr. 161, 164, 166, 167, 169, pdkh. rez. 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 179, 180, ptk. 182, 185, 187, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 195, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206.

w/Ptk. 8 po przyjeździe do Warszawy został powtórnie aresztowany i rozstrzelany na Powiaku.

Photo. Archive of Modern Records, file no. 202/XVIII/1

In his "Report", Pilecki wrote about the camp:

"[...] this giant 'mill,' processing people into dust, or, if you will, this giant 'roller,' crushing transports of people into a bloody pulp, revolved constantly and always around the same axis, called: annihilation."

[transl. K.L. Potocka, W. Wybrański]

Over the course of three years, Witold Pilecki passed on at least 10 reports from the camp. They reached the Allies via the Polish government-in-exile, but were ignored.

The world did not believe the reports from Auschwitz.



Photo: USHMM

In the spring of 1943, the majority of members of the camp resistance were either murdered or deported elsewhere. Pilecki knew that he would soon share their fate. This is why he decided to escape.



Photo. Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum

Witold Pilecki was probably the only person who entered and left Auschwitz of his own will. He escaped from the camp on Easter 1943 with two younger colleagues: Jan Redzej and Edward Ciesielski.



Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki



Photo. Private collection of Maria Serafińska-Domańska

Witold Pilecki was captured and deported to Auschwitz as Tomasz Serafiński, and it was under this name that he spent almost three years at the camp.

By a twist of fate, during his escape in nearby Wiśnicz, he met the real Tomasz Serafiński, who even offered him shelter!

In November 1943, Witold Pilecki was promoted to the rank of cavalry captain. At the time he returned to Warsaw, where he became engaged in the resistance and helped the families of Auschwitz inmates. In 1944, Pilecki fought in the Warsaw Uprising.





Photo. Warsaw Rising Museum

A building at the corner of Starynkiewicza Square and Aleje Jerozolimskie was named the “Witold’s Stronghold” to honor the bravery of his unit.

After the fall of the uprising, Witold Pilecki was taken into captivity along with other soldiers. He spent the last months of the war at the camp in Murnau. He was liberated by the Americans and left for Italy to join the Polish II Corps.

Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki

Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki

It was decided at the Yalta Conference that Poland would be left in the Soviet sphere of influence. The Polish borders were greatly changed: Sukurcze was now in Soviet territory.



Photo. Polona

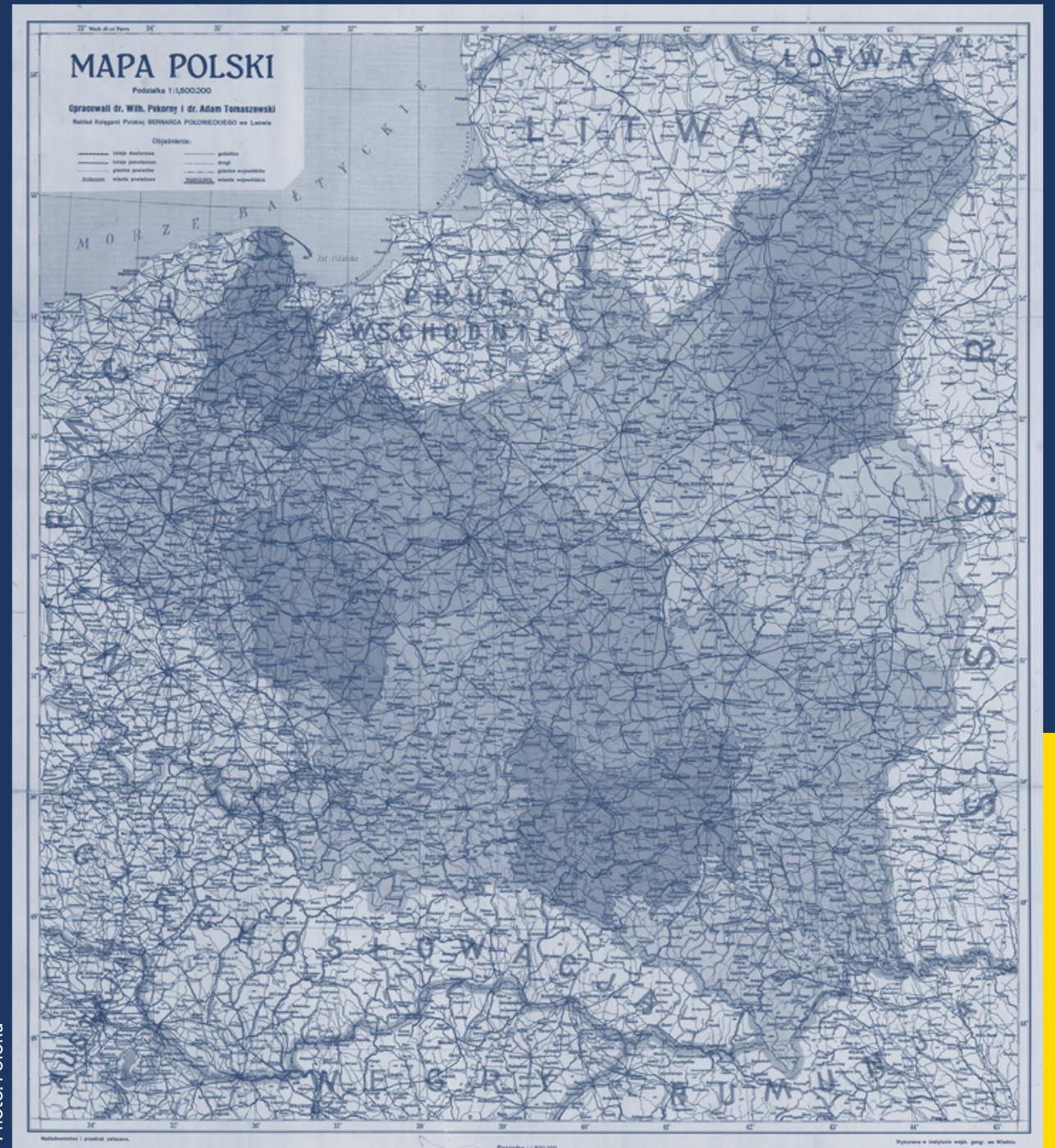


Photo. Polona

Witold Pilecki returned to Poland in the autumn of 1945. His commander, General Władysław Anders, tasked him with establishing an intelligence network in communist Poland, hoping that someday the country would regain sovereignty.



Already in 1946, Witold Pilecki received an order to leave Poland. The situation was getting more and more dangerous. The Security Office was closing in on Pilecki. However, he chose to stay with his family and continue his clandestine activities.





Photo. Marzenna Szymańska

Witold Pilecki was arrested on 8 May 1947 – he was ambushed by the communist Security Office in his friends' apartment at Pańska Street in Warsaw.



Photo. Marzenna Szymańska

For almost a year, Witold Pilecki was detained in prison at Rakowiecka Street in Warsaw. Today we know that he was brutally tortured and repeatedly interrogated.

Charged by the communists with espionage and treason, he was put on a show trial together with his seven collaborators and sentenced to death.

The sentence was carried out on 25 May 1948 at 9.30 p.m.

Photo. <https://biogramy.ipn.gov.pl/bio/wszystkie-biogramy/106001,Rotmistrz-Witold-Pilecki.html>



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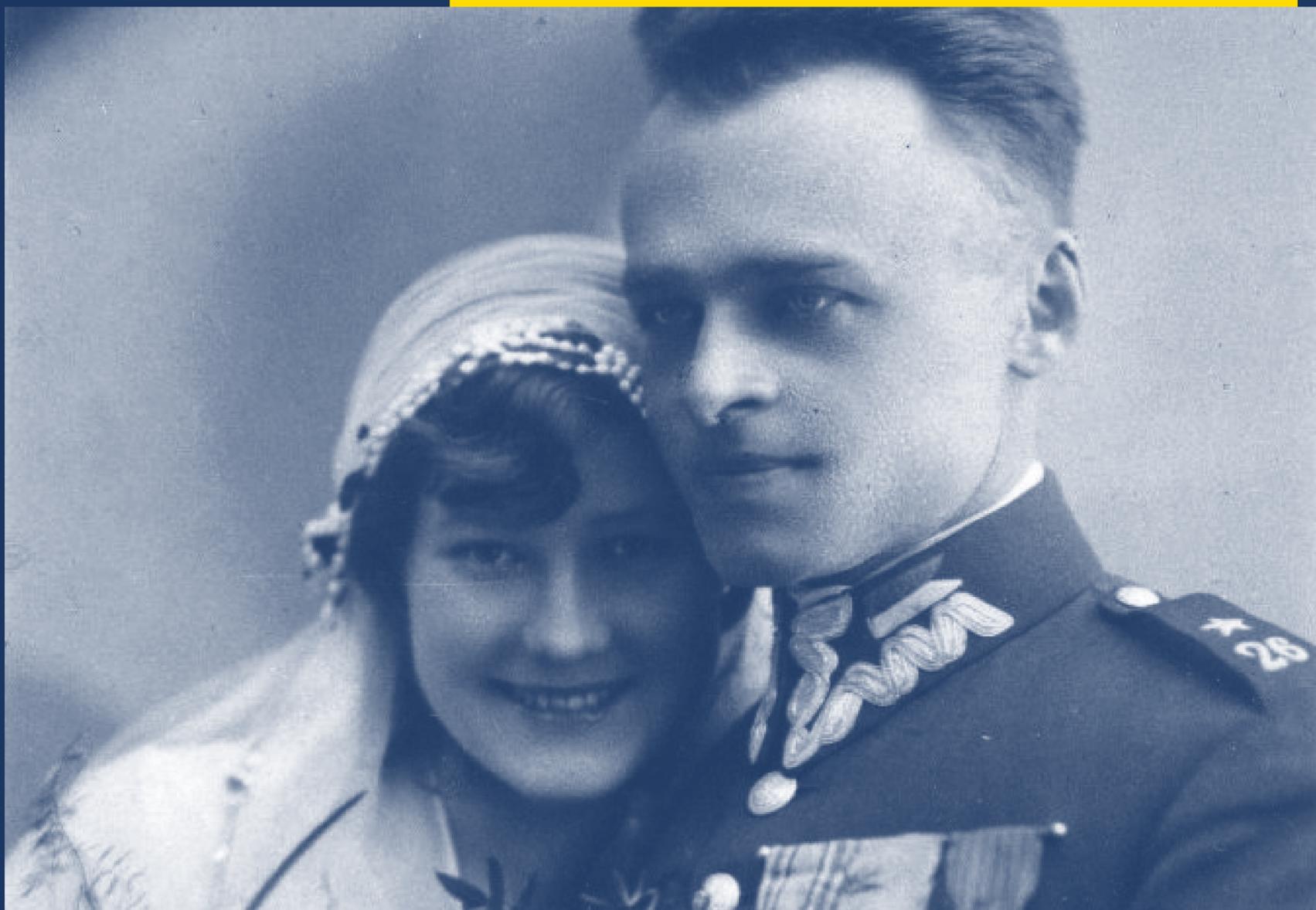


Photo. Private collection of Zofia and Andrzej Pilecki

For many years, Maria Pilecka did not know whether her husband was alive or where he was. Together with her children, Zofia and Andrzej, she was stigmatized as the closest relative of a traitor to the nation. They suffered many humiliations on this account.

The Sukurcze estate was razed to the ground – now it is just an empty field.

The grave of Witold Pilecki remains unknown to this day.

His relatives never doubted that Witold Pilecki did the right thing. He chose good, truth and freedom.

By a decision of the Minister of National Defense of 5 September 2013, Witold Pilecki was posthumously promoted to the rank of colonel.

“I’ve been trying to live my life so that in the hour of my death I would rather feel joy than fear.”

Witold Pilecki’s last words after the death sentence was pronounced

