



WYWIAD

My dad wanted me to be brave

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Zofia Pilecka-Optułowicz, the daughter of Rottmeister Pilecki, Lady of the Order of Polonia Restituta, the Curator of National Remembrance 2015, in an interview for Karolina Wichowska talks about her father, his attitude to the world and how the life of his closest ones looked like in a country ruled by the Communists.

Before I turned on the tape recorder, you told me the story of how you saved the life of a small kitten from your yard and called her "Rotka" - to honour the Rottmeister. Was sensitivity to the

fate of the weaker beings, to nature in general, one of the values your father taught you?

Most definitely. Dad always stressed that every living being has an enormous role to play. He explained to me that if you break the chain it will stop working. We were walking once. At some point my dad noticed a ladybug, underneath my feet, which I didn't see. "Pay attention! You almost stomped on a ladybug - he said to me. - Take it and put it on a leaf. It will be safe there". He also taught me that a horse is an extraordinary animal which has a soul. Why?

Dad felt nature with all of himself. I later wondered, how was it possible that he managed to survive the Auschwitz camp with his sensitivity... Was he aware that he was volunteering to go to such hell? He was a man of many talents which he didn't hide, but rather improve on them whenever he could.

"Well, because it is so smart - said my dad - when I was once galloping on my mare, Fable, to our residence in Sukurcze, she suddenly stopped. At first, it seemed she did that for no reason. It turned out; however, that a child was lying on the ground which I couldn't see from horseback".

It was proof for my dad how incredible creatures horses are. It all speaks to his great sensitivity. I try to live by his values every day, so now I not only take care of homeless cats, but even local titmice and pigeons. For many years I have had a beloved dog.

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There is also a famous anecdote that, in order to impress your mother, he would throw a bouquet of lilacs through an open window while galloping on a horse.

It actually happened. Father had the bravado of a cavalryman, an uhlan's imagination. And he didn't lose it

after the wedding. Mother was a teacher at a local school. When she came back home, tired after work, there was always some kind of attraction waiting for her: father dressed me and my brother Jędrek e.g. for a lady and an uhlán, or for people from Japan, or characters from fables.



**Witold Pilecki with his wife Maria
and son Andrzej, Ostrów
Mazowiecka, 1933**



**Witold Pilecki with his wife Maria,
Ostrów Mazowiecka**

It doesn't really fit the stereotype of an old-fashioned, pre-war officer - harsh, down to earth, focused on his career. And here - we had a natural educator!

You put it well. Every day he taught us values which we should live by. Today, it seems to me like he was in a rush. Like he knew he didn't have much time. He called me "the heir of fresh air". I asked him what he meant by that. He explained to me, that what I'm enjoying and admiring today may no longer be there one day. And that I would need to adjust to that new reality. He told me I had to be "a lady general" - a brave person who can make do in any situation. He paid much attention to physical education. When he escaped the camp in 1943, I was 10 years old. He stayed in Warsaw, while we lived with grandma in Ostrów Mazowiecka. I would often come to him and report on all my achievements in sport: that I can do a twine, that I already run one hundred metres, that I'm in a volleyball team, that I swim...

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"Oh, it's great that you swim, it's very important! – he praised me for it. – If I didn't know how to swim, I wouldn't be able to escape the camp, since I had to swim across the Soła river. You never know when you might need such a skill".

He also taught me conspiracy behaviours. We would drive around Warsaw in a tram. At some point we would get off. He would then give me an exercise: I had to warn a man walking behind me that a gendarme was heading our way from the other side. I was to walk over to a wall or a shop window if I saw one. It was to be a secret sign for the person walking behind me. Sometimes dad came to visit us in Ostrów. He usually locked himself up in a room, alone. He must have been working on conspiracy plans, since he was part of the "NIE" organisation since 1944. I once peeped on him through a keyhole, hoping that I would have him just for myself if he opened the door. I noticed then, that from time to time he would slowly chew on bread crusts. It's a habit he must have learned in the camp...

My relationship with my father I could compare to a process of education. The earliest childhood was like pre-school. The times of the German occupation – the first years of primary school. What came after his arrest and execution – that was on an entirely different level, like university.

When your father was arrested, you were fourteen years old.

It was 1947. On every May 8th, on Stanisław's name day, father came to Ostrów to give wishes to my uncle. On May 8th 1947, when the last train came to Warsaw, it turned out my dad wasn't on it. I was worried, because I thought something unexpected came up. However, during the night I heard a loud thump, like something hit the glass. I ran over to the window, but no one was there. My mom thought one of my friends might have played a joke on me. Such thumps repeated themselves almost every day for the next several months. I believe that my dad, in some mysterious way, wanted to show me that something wrong was happening to him – first that he was arrested, and then that he was tortured. He was tormented so bad that at

some point, when we visited him, he told my mom that he couldn't live anymore. He said that Oświęcim was nothing compared to what the Communist investigators were doing to him. According to pr. Antoni Czajkowski, who was held at the same prison Pilecki was, my father was tortured especially brutally. After the last questionings - as the priest stated - he had both his collarbones broken, so he couldn't even keep his head up and his hands were hanging along his body. Nonetheless, he had hoped that his conspiracy activities in Auschwitz would save his life. That is why he asked his sister-in-law, also a member of the underground, Eleonora Ostrowska to give the investigators the description of the organisation of the resistance inside the Auschwitz camp. Eleonora came through with this request. The officers took all the materials. Unfortunately, this did not save my dad's life, but perhaps because of it we didn't share his fate.



Witold Pilecki with his wife and children, Ostrów Mazowiecka, 1934



**Ulhan and a lady. Children of
Witold Pilecki, 1930s**



Andrzej and Zosia, 1936

The Rottmeister was executed in May 1948. How did you find out about this?

No one informed us. Mom went to bring a package to father. She did that every month. When she reached the prison on Rakowiecka Street in Warsaw, where father was held, she heard from the guards that the package couldn't be received because "Pilecki went away". Where? When? Of course, they didn't say a word about it. The first thought we had, was: he must have been deported to Siberia. Mother tried to get to know something, anything. She was so desperate, she even went to see a fortune-teller. Nothing worked. In the end, she came to terms with the fact that she would never find her husband again.

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brave person who can make do in any situation.

And what about you?

I never stopped searching. I wanted to find the place of his burial, whatever it took. At some point, my mom told me I was obsessed and that I should stop. But I continued my search as a form of a gift for my dad. I didn't mind the difficulties, I believed they would make the gift even more precious. I thought, I had to use all my strength if I was doing it for someone so dear to me. Someone, who himself went through an indescribable amount of suffering.

What was the price you had to pay for your resilience?

I don't want to talk about the hardships I had to face during my search, because it would be like handing someone a gift and then bragging about how expensive it was.

You had to drop your studies.

Indeed. After the matura high school exam, I got into the University of Technology in Warsaw, to water construction. All assistants there were "red". If someone had views not in line with the Communist ones, they would fail this person's classes and make it impossible to get to the professor's exam. One time, one of the professors took me aside and said: "Dear child, better drop the studies. You will only ruin your nerves. Maybe one day better times will come...". And so I did that. I was already engaged at this point and soon I also became a wife and a mother.

And prior to that, in school in Ostrów Mazowiecka, were you met with ostracism?

On the contrary. There, even in the darkest of moments, after my dad was arrested, I could count on the support of my friends and teachers. To this day, I remember as a propaganda broadcast by Wanda Odolska was played during a long break. The speaker was talking about Witold Pilecki's trial, calling him a traitor to the nation and a spy. My teacher asked me if that was my father. I confirmed and added that I was proud of him.

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The professor did not comment, which in these times required a lot of bravery.

While we lived in Ostrów, mother ran a local bookshop. Thanks to that we managed to get by. When her sister came back from the Ravensbrück camp, she took over running the bookshop and we returned to Warsaw. Mom hoped that in a big city she could find work as a teacher. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. To make a living she did various professions, including working as a tea lady and a cleaning lady. We lived near Warsaw in a room with a kitchen, at a holiday house. When in winter we lacked money for coal, we had to gather tree cones to warm up the room. Later, I had difficulties finding a job myself for a long time, but in the end I was hired at the INCO enterprise, associated with the PAX Association. Formally, I was employed as a physical worker, but I did an office job. The salary wasn't too high, but it allowed us to survive.

Thanks to your contacts in PAX, by the end of the 80s, you managed to meet with Józef Cyrankiewicz, at the time an already former prime minister of the Polish People's Republic and a prisoner of Auschwitz during the German occupation. Had you hoped that Cyrankiewicz would help you find out what happened to your father's body?

I counted on it very much. During the meeting, Cyrankiewicz was very polite towards me. He greeted me politely, even enthusiastically, like he was happy to see me. I used my husband's name: Optułowicz, so I'm not sure he knew who I was. I immediately said that my visit would be very short, because I was simply there to find out where the remains of my father, Witold Pilecki were lying. He replied: "Witold Pilecki? And who was that Witold Pilecki?". It got my blood boiling! I answered that if that is the case I have no further questions. I must have looked really angry since Cyrankiewicz tried to calm me down. He said he would have to ask "where it needed to be asked" and meet with me once again. I never received any message. Cyrankiewicz died soon after.

When in 2011, the Institute of National Remembrance, Council for Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites and Ministry of Justice began the program of searching the unknown places of burial of victims of the Communist regime, there was a real chance of finding your father's remains. You were one of the first people to give genetic material for comparison research. My guess is, you didn't even hesitate to do that.

I had no doubts whether to give my material. Although I do have to say, sometimes I'm close to admitting that my dad can never be found. I heard someone say that he was deliberately taken to the boiler room for the execution. Others weren't taken there. So it is possible that he was thrown into the furnace. On the other hand, I believe he could be buried at the Powązki cemetery, because my daughter Ania Krysia, born in 1958, led me there. She was quite healthy, but unexpectedly she died on the second day after birth. The lady doctor opened the door to my room and simply said: "Your child died". It's just how it was back then. We buried her at the newly created children section at the communal cemetery (Military Powązki). As it later turned out, it was directly neighbouring "Łączka" [a place where many Polish freedom fighters and patriots, killed by the Communists, were buried; translator's annotation]. I'm convinced it was my dad who led me there. Independently of the fact that they were looking for my father at "Łączka", I went to the searching site as often as I could. Sometimes, I took doughnuts and sweet drinks with me so that people searching for the remains didn't drink just regular water. I'm fascinated with the pietism of the team working there. I admire their utmost respect for even the smallest of bones: each and every one of them is cleaned and taken to the forensic doctor. You need to see this for yourself to witness how a living person treats bones of a dead person with such respect.

The interview was conducted by Karolina Wichowska

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[BACK](#)