

*Part One*

**CHAPTER 1**

**1. Voluntarily to Auschwitz**

It was the early morning of 19<sup>th</sup> September, 1940, when a man came out of a small building in a residential district of northern Warsaw and briskly set out towards the centre of the city. The pavements were still wet with dew. Trams clanged, trucks rattled by, and trucks, packed with German soldiers, rushed along, noisily overtaking all other vehicles. Men and women, silent and withdrawn, began to crowd the pavements, moving towards the main roads. Bundled-up country women with cans on their backs went from house to house, bringing milk to the capital from the nearby villages.

The man, now in the midst of a crowd of pedestrians, made his way through them decisively. Of medium height, well-built, about forty years old, with a quiet, resolute expression on his face, he walked like someone who had a more important object in view than boarding a tram.

Suddenly the peaceful scene of people going to their work was disturbed. A tramcar drew up, and before it came to a stop men were jumping off and, shoving and pushing, running into the side streets.

‘Turn round. Turn round! German trucks, a round-up!’

Within a few seconds the street was deserted. Now alone, the man went on his way with the same decisive step. Round the corner, police trucks and figures crouched against the walls

could now be seen. Grey-green uniforms appeared as if from out of the ground.

‘Halt, halt! Hands up!’

## **2. Undercover Mission**

In the covered riding-school of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Lancers over a thousand men lay side by side on the sawdust. Faces down and hands stretched out in front of them, they looked like rag dolls. But they were alive, for they fidgeted, coughed, shifted their positions. Several SS men, with whips in their hands, moved around between the thronged bodies, treading on feet and heads, dealing out blows, kicking and swearing. In the galleries that ran round the riding-school stood machine guns, aimed at the men lying below; beside them were more men in grey-green uniforms.<sup>1</sup>

This scene was the result of the third round-up in Warsaw. This time the Germans did not hunt people on the streets, but surrounded several districts, chiefly inhabited by the professional middle class, and led out all the men from their houses. The round-ups had two targets: to terrorize the nation and to catch a certain number of underground workers by throwing out a large net at random.

The man who had deliberately marched towards the SS and had allowed himself to be caught now lay among a heap of bodies. He neither fidgeted nor uttered a sound, and thus had so far avoided the whips and boots of the SS guards. Lying there quietly, he could collect his thoughts and consider the situation.

His name was Witold Pilecki; he was an officer of the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Uhlans. In his pocket he had a skilfully forged identity card in the name of Tomasz Serafiński; it had been made for a reserve officer who had escaped capture after the capitulation of

## CHAPTER 1 – 2. UNDERCOVER MISSION

Warsaw and who for some time had hidden in the flat in which Pilecki had subsequently lived. Serafiński had left an insurance card behind him and the new lodger began to use it. Later other papers were forged to match it.<sup>2</sup>

The mere fact that Pilecki was illegally walking about free was quite enough, if he were picked up, to send him to prison. In December 1939 the German authorities had ordered all regular and reserve officers to come forward of their own accord and go to POW camps, and on 14<sup>th</sup> December they specified the place of assembly. Those who did not do so were threatened with death. Out of about 20,000 officers who were hiding in Warsaw at that time, 400 are said to have come forward.

Pilecki, of course, did not obey the German order and began to play a leading part in the Secret Polish Army (Tajna Armia Polska, or TAP), one of many underground organizations. It later merged with the official secret forces, the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, or AK). This activity, in the eyes of the occupying forces, would have qualified him for the death sentence. It was nothing, however, compared to what he was shortly to attempt. Pilecki had proposed that he should be assigned a new task. In Warsaw there were plenty of other men who could carry out his duties. But a couple of months earlier the Nazis had opened a concentration camp at Auschwitz. Pilecki wanted to go there to organize the prisoners, look for means of resistance and mutual assistance, and send reports to Warsaw. Some form of contact with the outside world had to be found. The problem was how to get into Auschwitz? Pilecki was ready to let himself be arrested in a round-up.<sup>3</sup>

The idea was so daring that it was hard to accept at first. It was only after much insistence on Pilecki's part, when it was evident that he was really prepared to carry through his plan, that his commander accepted the proposal. All the details were discussed and means of communications established.

Now, when the first part of the plan had been accomplished and he lay, stiffening in discomfort on the wet sawdust, he could once again reflect on his intentions and think over the whole enterprise. He was still in Warsaw, only yards away from friends and freedom, but the heavy hand of the occupiers, which he had himself sought, pinned him to the ground. He no longer had any choice; already around him panted and groaned the men who would shortly become his fellow camp-mates and would, in all probability, leave their bones there. Had he done the right thing; would he have the strength of body and mind to survive; would he have the energy to fulfil his task?

Two days later, after a few men had been released, the remainder were taken to Auschwitz.

### **3. The German Plans for Auschwitz**

A conference was held in the office of SS General Eric von dem Bach-Zelewski in the police building in Wrocław. Present at it were SS Colonel Richard Glücks, Inspector of Concentration Camps; SS Colonel Arpad Wiegand, von dem Bach's right-hand man; and several other SS officers. Outside the temperature was 30 degrees Celsius below zero, but in the well-heated office it was so hot that some of those present discreetly undid their uniform collars.

It was the beginning of 1940, a few months after Germany had attacked Poland in September 1939 and the subsequent partition of Poland between Germany and Soviet Russia.\* The SS men were discussing the plan of a new concentration camp. By now six of these camps existed in the Great German Reich: Dachau, founded in the spring of 1933, less than two months after Hitler's assumption of power; Sachsenhausen; Buchenwald; Flossenbürg; Mauthausen; and a women's camp at Ravensbrück. The camp at

---

\*Note to 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Under the terms of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, see p. 92n.

spocic/  
Czasami więc, wśród podawanych faktów będą jednak wstawiały myśl  
wrażającą to co się czuło.  
Nie wiem, czy konieczne ma to obniżenie wartości napisanego.  
Nie było się z kamienia - często mu zazdrościłem - miało się  
jeszcze ciągle bijące, czasem w gardło, serce, kołająca się gdzieś...  
byba w głowie - myśl - czasami zapalenia, z trudem...  
O nich - wstawiając od czasu do czasu zdań parę, -sadaę, że dopi  
ę odda obraz prawdziwy.

Dnia 19 wr  
Jeszcze ży  
ano, poszedłem s  
ustawiane pr  
Potym zał  
do koszar Szwo  
Po spisaniu  
le biurze i ode  
potym u k  
le, gdzie pozost  
W ciągu ty  
padającą na ich  
złiwych do prz  
bów utrzymywa  
W tym czas  
o ogromne sumy  
W nocy spa  
Ujeżdżalni  
Po czterec

Było nas t  
Mnie osobi  
y zapani nasię  
ię w tym, że cał  
Nęciła mni  
Współtowar  
zasu Powstania  
le umu, napad  
zawadził" o refl  
Lecz ja-w  
Było by to  
On - wogół  
21-go rano  
ortujących moto  
i załadowano  
W wagonach tych przedtym widocznie musieli być wapno, gdyż c  
podłoga była nim wysypana.  
Wagony zamknięto. Wieziono dzień cały. Pięć ani jeść nie dali. Br  
a jeść nikt nie chciał. Mieliśmy, wydany dzień poprzedniego, chleb - m  
negośmy jeszcze wtedy ani jeść ani coś się mogli. Chciało się nam  
ylko bardzo pić. Wapno, pod wpływem wstrząsów rozdrabniało się w pył.  
Iło się w powietrzu, drażniło noszra i gardło. Pić nie dali.  
Przez szczeliny desek, którymi nabite były okna, widzieliśmy, że  
a nas gdzieś na Czestochowsku.

około 10-ej wieczór/godzina 22-ga, poczęły się zatrzymywać w jakimś  
miejsu i dalej już nie ruszyły. Słychać było krzyki, wrzask, -otwieranie  
ogonów, ujadanie psów.  
To miejsce we wspomnieniach moich nawiązywałbym pewnie - w któr  
choczący w ten sposób, że...



Captain Witold Pilecki, pictured with the first page of his 1945 report used as a major primary source for *Fighting Auschwitz*.

*Fighting Auschwitz*, Copyright (c) 2018 Jaroslaw Garlinski & Aquila Polonica (U.S.) Ltd.

Pilecki Family

ABN

**FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**



USHMM/HL



AP/WIDE

The countless German round-ups of Polish citizens.

### CHAPTER 1 – 3. THE GERMAN PLANS FOR AUSCHWITZ

Oranienburg, founded in 1933, had been closed a year later. Just before the war there were altogether about 25,000 prisoners in these camps. Now, although the western lands of Poland had already been officially integrated into the German state, the Polish underground resistance had started to grow and the SS officers, planning mass arrests, directed their gaze towards Silesia, seeing there the place for the next camp. Their thoughts were of the future. They wished to create a camp for Polish prisoners and also find a site centrally placed in relation to all the territories which had not yet been conquered but which, in the course of the next few years, the SS believed would come under Nazi control. The chosen site would require convenient railway access and needed to be somewhat distant from larger centres of population. After discussion and an examination of a map, the assembled officers accepted Arpad Wiegand's advice and their choice fell on the Polish town of Oświęcim, 'Auschwitz' in German.<sup>4</sup>

Before the war this was a small town west of Kraków, located at the confluence of the Vistula and Soła Rivers in the region known as Silesia. It had a population of about 12,000, and was an unhealthy, malaria-ridden, poorly industrialized, ugly town, situated right on the edge of the Polish state. The choice was made and Glücks sent a report to the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler. As a result of this, on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 1940, a commission visited Auschwitz. Though the commissioners' assessment was negative, a second commission was sent in April under SS Major Rudolf Höss. It also came to the conclusion that the site was unsuitable for a camp designed to hold many thousands of prisoners. These people would have to live and work there for some time, so at least water and the most primitive sanitary facilities would be required. The site did not possess these two basic requirements. The water was foul, brackish and polluted, and there was nowhere for impurities to drain. Despite

this conclusion, Höss prepared a report in which he suggested that use could be made of the selected site. Himmler gave Höss his support and on 27<sup>th</sup> April his office issued the order that a concentration camp was to be constructed there. Two days later Glücks appointed Höss as commandant.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. Construction and Early Days of Auschwitz**

The site, which was soon to become the greatest cemetery in the history of the world, was initially of modest appearance. There were some abandoned pre-war Polish military barracks consisting of twenty brick buildings, mainly single-storey, dilapidated and filthy. They stood on the left bank of the river Soła in a suburb called Zasole. Next to the barracks stood several buildings belonging to the Polish Tobacco Monopoly, which were also within the perimeter of the proposed camp.

Höss chose five SS men and arrived in Auschwitz on 29<sup>th</sup> April. On 20<sup>th</sup> May, SS NCO Gerhard Palitzsch brought thirty Germans from Sachsenhausen, almost all of them criminals. These were the first 'trusties' of the new camp, and they were given numbers from 1 to 30. In charge of them was no.1, Bruno Brodniewicz, a German with a Polish surname, who became the camp's Senior Prisoner. The second newcomer to attain equal rank (an exceptional arrangement) was another German with a Polish surname, Leo Wiczorek, no.30. Palitzsch was appointed Rapportführer, responsible for discipline.<sup>6</sup> These three names have gone down in the history of Auschwitz.

The Town Council drafted 300 local Jews to the camp, and the cleaning-up of the neglected buildings began. They were guarded by fifteen SS cavalry men, sent from Kraków. Even the most elementary tasks had not been completed when an inquiry came



## CHAPTER 1 – 4. CONSTRUCTION AND EARLY DAYS OF AUSCHWITZ



ABM

After the Germans occupied Poland in late 1939, they incorporated the Silesia region into the German Reich. Pre-war Polish military barracks at Oświęcim (pictured above), located within that region, were selected as the site for the Auschwitz concentration camp.

## FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ



YV 951:FA 15742

Expansion of the Auschwitz central camp. The Germans used slave labour by prisoners to build the growing concentration camp.



YV 951:FA 15737

## CHAPTER 1 – 4. CONSTRUCTION AND EARLY DAYS OF AUSCHWITZ

from the Department of Police and Security in Wrocław as to how soon the camp would be ready to receive the first consignments of prisoners. Before a reply had been sent, a train (for once a passenger train) arrived at the station in Auschwitz, bringing 728 Poles, all of them political prisoners, from a prison in Tarnów. They were mainly young men, caught on the frontier attempting to reach Hungary en route to France, where the Polish Army was re-forming (and they were, therefore, called 'tourists' in the camp). In addition there were a number of priests and school-teachers, and several dozen Jews. The members of this transport were given numbers from 31 to 758 and they were put into quarantine in a building that had belonged to the Tobacco Monopoly.<sup>7</sup>

This first transport arrived in Auschwitz on 14<sup>th</sup> June, 1940, and this date is accepted as the official beginning of the camp. It occurred at the very moment when the Nazi Reich achieved one of the high points of its hitherto unchecked, conquering progress. During their journey through Kraków, while the train was standing at the station, the prisoners had heard a bulletin in which the German announcer, choking with emotion, reported the fall of Paris.

People who have survived Soviet camps know that the worst months were those during which they had to build their own prison from nothing. Prisoners were brought to the snow-covered, frozen Siberian wasteland and were ordered to set up camp there, to surround the place with wire, to dig plots, and later to erect huts, build kitchens, dig down for water and construct latrines. The climate was killing them, and yet they had to work beyond endurance, receiving even less food than prison regulations required.

It did not fall to the lot of the first prisoners of Auschwitz to experience such conditions, since they arrived in summer and were hustled into stone buildings, with an already operational

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

kitchen, some plumbing and water. They were, however, to endure perhaps worse suffering by being guinea pigs for new experiments. This was the first camp for Poles and the first to be built on territory not inhabited by Germans, although it had been recently invaded and integrated into the Reich. The Poles took second place on Hitler's list, immediately following the Jews,<sup>8</sup> so a camp far more destructive than anything previously tried at Dachau, Sachsenhausen or Buchenwald had to be prepared for them there. Experiments were performed, new forms of terror and torture were devised, more and more refined ways of maltreating prisoners were developed. For the first few days they were not sent to work, and instead had to undergo several hours of physical exercise which even the youngest of them could not take. They were kept standing at roll-call for hours on end, everything had to be done at the double, visits to the latrine were timed in seconds and they had to queue for their soup on their knees and eat it sitting on their haunches. The continual rush, the continual running was enforced with clubs, without which the SS men and trusties never appeared. At night, packed together on the straw, the prisoners were unable even to turn over. Nourishment consisted of about three slices of very heavy German bread, a scrape of margarine and less than a pint of watery soup. There was no hospital, and when work began on a caricature of a sickbay, no doctors were allowed to work there.

This preliminary period, which caused a great many deaths, also provoked complaints by the camp commandant Höss. As an expert on concentration camps (Dachau, Sachsenhausen), he could not tolerate the primitive state of the security arrangements, the small number of SS guards and the attitude of the villages surrounding his empire. In Germany he had dealt with a terrorized or indifferent population, while here, on land formerly Polish, he felt an atmosphere around the camp of hate,

## CHAPTER 1 – 4. CONSTRUCTION AND EARLY DAYS OF AUSCHWITZ

resistance and revenge, together with a readiness to help the ill-treated prisoners. He repeatedly sent reports to his superiors demanding wider powers, but they usually produced no response. It required the first escape to provoke a reaction.

On 6<sup>th</sup> July a young Pole, with the symbolic name of Wiejowski (in Polish, a man on the run), disappeared from the camp. He was sought for three days and nights. For the whole of this time a cordon of SS men ringed the camp and the prisoners' punishment roll-call lasted for twenty hours without a break.<sup>9</sup>

Höss immediately took advantage of the occasion. When von dem Bach came on a tour of inspection on 18<sup>th</sup> July, Höss outlined the camp's position very clearly, and before the end of the month he had received the go-ahead for the speedy eviction of the local population. First of all the area of Zasole, in which the camp was situated, was cleared of Poles, followed closely by several villages. An area of about twenty square miles was cleared and was recognized as coming under the camp's jurisdiction. From north to south the site measured at least six miles, from east to west more than two.<sup>10</sup>

On 15<sup>th</sup> August the first transport of prisoners from Warsaw arrived. In it were 513 political prisoners from the Pawiak jail and 1,153 men caught on the streets and sent off to the camp without even having been interrogated by the Gestapo.

On 31<sup>st</sup> December a Pole, brought to the camp from Katowice, was given the number 7879. This did not mean that the camp actually contained that many inmates. There were in fact far fewer. A very small number had been released; many had been killed. On 19<sup>th</sup> December the Archbishop of Kraków, Prince Adam Sapieha, through the Parochial Office in Auschwitz, sent a letter to the camp commandant, asking for permission to conduct religious services for Roman Catholic prisoners at Christmas. This request was refused but he was allowed to supply the prisoners with about

6,000 parcels of about two pounds each<sup>11</sup>—an indication that, except for the few released, about 1,800 prisoners had died or been murdered. The 6,000 remaining men could all be accommodated in the original camp. This would not long be the case.

The huge area taken away from the local population awaited its new destiny.

## **5. Witold Pilecki Arrives in Auschwitz**

The first winter of the war had been exceptionally long and cold; the second turned out to be even worse. In Warsaw the first snow fell on 11<sup>th</sup> October, while in the southern part of the country, nearer the mountains, the temperature remained constantly below zero.

By now the camp in Auschwitz was already four months old, yet the living quarters had not been prepared for winter, nor was there any winter clothing. In many barracks there were neither stoves nor windows, the prisoners went barefoot, without caps, sweaters or gloves, with ragged and dirty Wehrmacht uniforms thrown over their shoulders. Every day frozen men, who could no longer stand up, were carried back from work; hundreds went down with chills and lung diseases that killed them within days. With the exception of the trusties and the lucky ones who worked indoors, everyone was ill. The marshy, unhealthy mists that did not lift until late in the day crept in everywhere and finished off those who might still have survived in a better climate.

Then came the terrible day of 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1940. At the time of the noon roll-call one prisoner was found to be missing, so the camp authorities had the whole camp stand at attention from noon to 9 p.m. The wintry autumn weather, much worse than a dry frost, reached the height of its bitterness. One of the prisoner-doctors recalls this day in his report:

## CHAPTER 1 – 5. WITOLD PILECKI ARRIVES IN AUSCHWITZ

...From dawn heavy rain and sleet had been driving down and a strong north-east wind was blowing. From noon onwards frozen men began to be carried or brought in on barrows, first one by one, later whole groups, and finally en masse. It was terrible to see these men, comatose, half-conscious, crawling, reeling like drunks, babbling incoherently and with difficulty, covered with spittle and foaming at the mouth, dying, gasping out their last breath. All day and all night all our personnel never ceased in their efforts to save them. Above all they were given hot coffee and soup to drink. At that time we had no or practically no medicines. The rooms had no stoves and often no windows. A few hundred people were saved thanks to the efforts of almost all the hospital personnel. Two hundred died all the same...<sup>12</sup>

That day Pilecki, who had already been in the camp over a month under the name of Tomasz Serafiński, number 4859, experienced his first crisis. The arrival in Auschwitz, after a journey of many hours, had been a great shock—his imagination, though prepared for the worst, had still fallen short of the real thing. He thus relates the march from the railway station to the camp:

On the way one of us was ordered to run to a post at the side of the road; a burst of automatic weapons fire followed him immediately. He was killed. Ten of his immediate neighbours were pulled out of the ranks and shot on the march with pistols on the grounds of ‘collective responsibility’ for the ‘escape’, arranged by the SS themselves. The eleven were dragged along by straps tied to one leg. The dogs were teased with the bloody corpses and set on to them. All this to the accompaniment of laughter and jokes.<sup>13</sup>

During his first days, however, Pilecki was lucky, for he was put on barrack-room duty and worked in Block 17a (old number).<sup>\*</sup> It was true that the block chief was 'Bloody Alojs', one of the worst German trusties, but it was indoor work with the privilege of extra food. Unfortunately it did not last long. Alojs demanded not only work but also severity, and after a few days threw Pilecki out into the camp together with several others who did not want to wield clubs. It was already October and the prisoners were beginning to be overcome by the damp wind and the cold from the foggy marsh air. Pilecki survived the murderous roll-call, but was so exhausted that only the speedy help of a friend, a doctor working as a male nurse in the temporary hospital, allowed him to recoup his strength and get through the next days without breaking down.

He survived, made himself a vest out of a cement-sack, although he risked a beating for doing so, and, assisted by an extra bowl of soup from the hospital, went back to building up the network which in a few months was to cover the most important nerve-centres of the camp.

## **6. Organization and Administration of the Auschwitz Camp**

Auschwitz was built from the very beginning on principles already practised for seven years in other German concentration camps. At the head stood a commandant, who was responsible for everything, and to whom, directly or indirectly, every SS man and every prisoner was subordinate. Beside his own commandant's

---

<sup>\*</sup> Note to 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Buildings in Auschwitz were called 'blocks'. Blocks were numbered and served various functions, e.g., barracks, hospital, storerooms, etc., which evolved over time. In the summer of 1941, eight new blocks were added in the central camp, and some of the old blocks had their numbers changed. An 'a' added to the block number designated the first floor (above ground level).



office, with an adjutant and a mail censorship office, he controlled four operational departments: the camp itself with all the prisoners and the SS men employed there; the Political Department; the Administrative Department; and the garrison that guarded the camp. The SS doctors belonged to the latter.

These departments could be described in the above order, but it will be more logical to deal with them in the sequence in which they developed as the camp expanded. The camp commandant requires no special mention, since his activities are obvious. It seems therefore best to start with the camp itself, its prisoners and the SS men employed there.

Directly in charge of the camp was an SS officer with the rank corresponding to captain, whose deputy, responsible for discipline, was the Rapportführer, an NCO. Under him were SS privates, each of whom superintended one of the barracks where the prisoners lived. The organization and assignment of labour was carried out by another SS officer; under him were the SS men who went out with the Kommandos (prisoner working-parties). This was all handled in a separate office.

The camp guards had their own commander and only when on duty came under the authority of the commandant. They manned all the watchtowers around the camp; they formed a great security ring around the whole large area in which the prisoners worked, they provided SS men to guard prisoners who were sent to work outside the security ring; and there was also a company of specialist dog-handlers. The guards had no right to interfere with the administration of the camp, for the inmates' discipline was none of their business and in principle they were not concerned with how the prisoners worked. Their main task was to guard, to see that nobody escaped from the camp, and that any attempted rebellion or attack from outside was immediately dealt with. Every meeting with an SS man was a possible risk for

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

a prisoner, but the guards were less dangerous in this respect, unless it was a question of an escape.

The SS doctors belonged formally to the garrison and must be mentioned here, though only from an organizational point of view. Their role will be described more fully in the context of the health service and the prisoners' hospital. The Senior Medical Officer was the SS doctor for the whole garrison, normally with the rank of colonel. Subordinate to him were the SS pharmacy, the disinfection department, the dental unit, the SS hygiene institute, SS doctors for the troops and SS camp doctors. The Senior Medical Officer was responsible to the camp commandant. No SS men, regardless of rank, were allowed to interfere with the doctors; the hospital was, as it were, independent.

The next operational department was the Camp Administration. Its head was responsible for billeting and the supply of food and clothing, both for the SS garrison and all the prisoners. The organization of the German camps was riddled with cynicism and disregard for their own regulations, but this was perhaps most glaringly evident in the administration, which, although it did not have any opportunity for refined brutality, yet hung over the prisoners as a constant, inexorable, slow sentence of death.

The rations officially laid down for the prisoners were only 2,150 calories for those doing hard labour, and 1,738 calories for the rest, whereas the indispensable norm for the former should have been 4,800 and for the latter 3,600 calories. The camp commandant and the head of the Administrative Department knew this and yet, instead of trying to ensure that the prisoners got at least these starvation rations, both, fully aware of what they were doing, robbed the helpless wretches. In Auschwitz, twice a week, a huge truck drove up to the prisoners' storerooms and tons of food supplies were loaded on to it and carried to the SS kitchen.

Every soldier in the garrison knew that still more food was stolen by the many trusties. As a result, even if extra punishment or the guard's club did not knock his bowl out of his hand, a prisoner got a maximum of 1,744 calories daily and the worst-treated had to be content with only 1,302 calories.<sup>14</sup> It was not strange that in the daily, secret report made to the commandant, the list of those who had died from natural causes contained, more than any others, names of people who had starved to death. Hunger was the most frightful, the most hateful incubus, hanging over the prisoners. Neither Palitzsch nor the Political Department, nor the most terrible of the trusties, ever managed to destroy as many human beings as did this merciless enemy of life. Only the gas chambers were more effective. And yet Rudolf Höss in his memoirs, describing the work of his administrator, could say:

He should pay special attention to the billeting, clothing and above all the feeding of the prisoners. By means of constant supervision he should personally superintend the cooking of the food. Prisoners should be fed well and to repletion.<sup>15</sup>

After this astonishing statement, musing further on the duties of the administration, Höss wrote:

The keeper of the prisoners' deposits must ensure that any insurance policies or cards in his keeping do not lapse. Premiums for social insurance should be paid by the administration, private insurance by the prisoner himself.<sup>16</sup>

So wrote the commandant of the camp, in which the SS officer, directly in charge of the prisoners, greeted each new transport with the words:

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

If there are any Jews in the transport, they cannot live more than two weeks, if there are priests, they may live one month, the rest three months.\*

The commandant's last department for keeping prisoners under control was the Political Department. The importance of this institution in the system of Hitler's camps was so great that it ought to be given priority, if it were not for the fact that chronologically it was the last to come to the camp. First the SS garrison had to be brought in, later the barracks had to be built and surrounded by barbed wire, then the prisoners were herded into them, and only then could the Gestapo start its work.

To understand the basis of the system of concentration camps one has to remember that in principle the Nazis did not consider them as places where a man served his sentence. Occasionally, as the result of a special order, a man came straight to a camp with a definite sentence of a certain number of years, but the general rule was different: a camp was a dumping-ground to relieve pressure on the prisons at the disposal of the Gestapo or Kripo†. These were usually crowded, particularly during the war, and men were sent to camps in order to make room for the recently arrested. The criminal prisoners, who had fixed sentences, cursed this system bitterly, for the time spent in a camp was not counted towards their sentence. In theory, after spending a certain number of years in a camp, in much worse conditions than in prison, they were to return to their cells after the war to complete their sentences. Recidivists were never meant to be released. Political prisoners were in a different situation. They were generally interrogated with refined brutality, but normally were neither tried nor sentenced. They were to stay in the camp until the end

---

\* A tablet with this speech hangs in the Auschwitz Museum.

† Kriminalpolizei (Criminal Police).

of the war at least; sometimes the Gestapo sent a directive that they were to be liquidated there, either at once or after some time. So they were also put, so to speak, into storage. Those who were brought to the camp as the result of a round-up were also not serving any sentence, for nothing had been proved against them and they had not stood trial. They were the harvest of the total terror which was intended to frighten the whole nation and deprive it of the will and courage to resist.

In light of this general principle, it is easier to understand the role of the Political Department in a concentration camp. First of all, it was an agency of the security forces of the great area over which Hitler's Reich ruled. A file on each prisoner, unless he had been caught in a round-up, was sent to the camp with a copy of the papers on his case. The Political Department acted as the long arm of the local Gestapo and 'looked after' the arrested man. It has been mentioned above that the order for liquidation could follow a prisoner to the camp. Sometimes it was carried out years later. Inexperienced men, who had just arrived in the camp, constantly hoped for a miracle, hoped to be set free. Each morning at roll-call they expected their numbers to be read out and that that would mean freedom. After a few months they changed their minds and, like the rest of the camp, quaked when an SS man, with a list in his hand, appeared before the rows of men standing at attention. They knew by then that this man was the harbinger of death, that those whose numbers were read out would go to Block 11 and, perhaps that very morning, would find themselves against the black wall.

In the central camp executions were carried out in Block 11, generally by a shot in the back of the head from a small-calibre gun. The naked prisoner stood against a black wooden board on the wall. The camp prison, called 'the bunker', was also in the basement of this block.

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

Sometimes a number read out in the morning meant that the Gestapo, for one reason or another, had decided to reopen the interrogation. The prisoner might be questioned on the spot or he might be returned under escort to his original prison and fall into the hands of the same official who had tortured him before. Thus, being taken to a concentration camp did not mean that contact with the Gestapo had at last been ended.

The second task of the Political Department was to look after internal camp security, to keep a file on every prisoner, to interrogate them in cases of violation of the camp rules, to pursue them outside the camp in case of escape (by sending out police notices) and to ensure in general that discipline in the camp was kept at a high level. It also carried out the formalities connected with releases; in this respect it was not overworked.

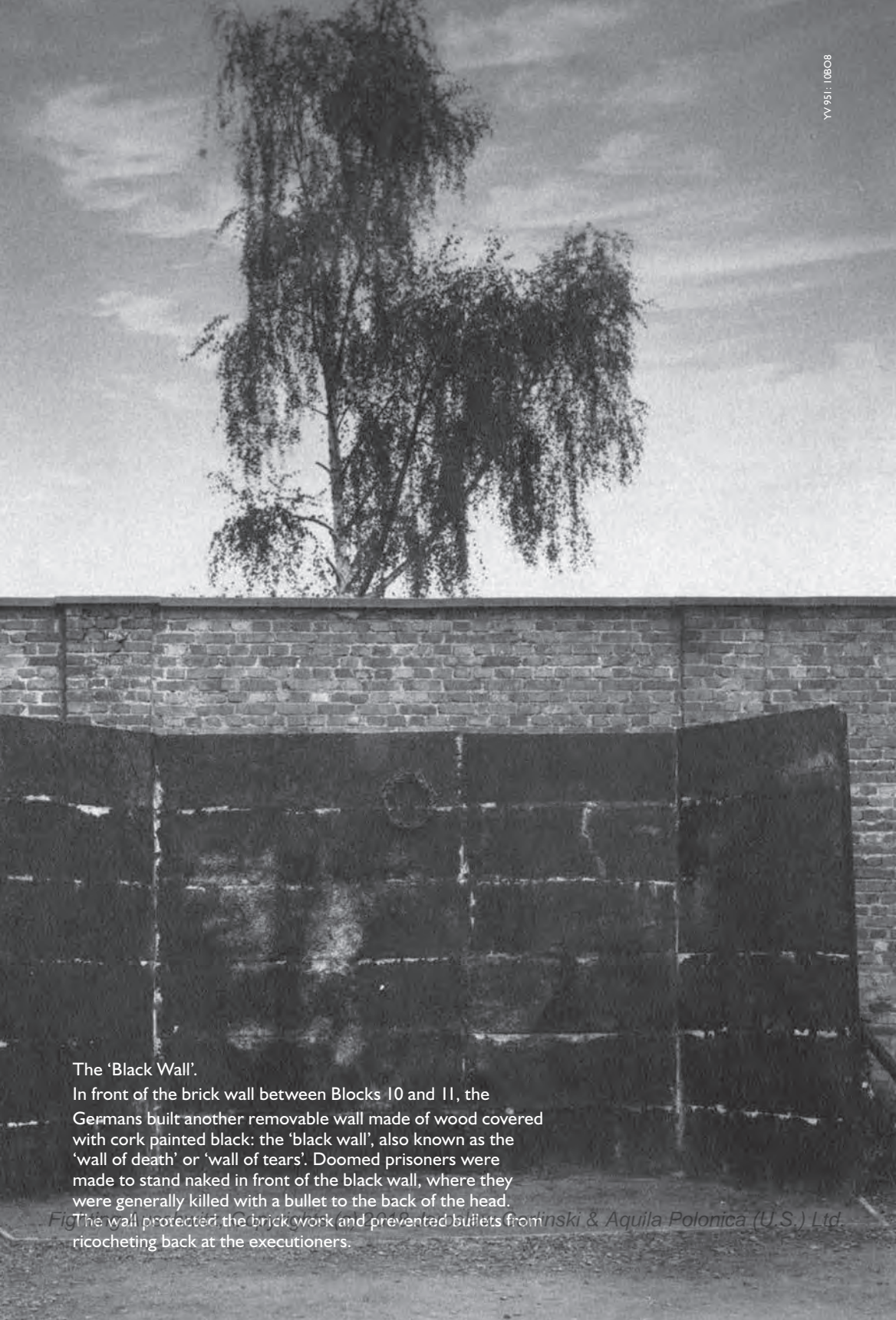
It was hard to know whose way it was best to keep out of in Auschwitz: Rapportführer Palitzsch, or the head of the Political Department, Second Lieutenant Maximilian Grabner, and his assistant, Wilhelm Boger. Palitzsch personally performed many thousands of executions (he himself admitted personally shooting 25,000 prisoners),<sup>17</sup> using a small-calibre gun; on his own initiative he tortured prisoners and frequently sought the opportunity to do so—thus he was generally regarded as the most dangerous man in the camp. However, a cold appraisal of the facts leads to the conclusion that the decisions of the Political Department, with Grabner at its head, claimed more victims. Even if one discounts the sentences that only passed through the hands of this department, since they had been forwarded by Gestapo officials elsewhere, it passed thousands of sentences itself. Palitzsch carried them out and thus he was singled out from all sides as a murderer; but he was, after all, Grabner's tool. In many towns the cellars of the Gestapo earned themselves an evil reputation as places of torture, but very few of them reached the level of the



ABWILE

The infamous Block 11.

The sign over the door in this photo reads 'Blok Śmierci' (Death Block). Block 11 housed the camp prison ('bunker'), punishment cells and torture chambers. The Penal Company was located in this block from early in the camp's existence until May 1942, when it was moved to Birkenau. Block 11 was also the site where, in September 1941, the gas Zyklon B was used for the first time in the mass murder of human beings—the first victims were 600 Soviet POWs and 250 sick prisoners.



### The 'Black Wall'.

In front of the brick wall between Blocks 10 and 11, the Germans built another removable wall made of wood covered with cork painted black: the 'black wall', also known as the 'wall of death' or 'wall of tears'. Doomed prisoners were made to stand naked in front of the black wall, where they were generally killed with a bullet to the back of the head.

*Fig* The wall protected the brick work and prevented bullets from ricocheting back at the executioners.



Political Department in Auschwitz and in very few places were such subtle means of torture thought up.

## 7. Use of Prisoners in the Camp Administration

These four operational departments in the hands of the commandant of Auschwitz were terrible weapons, but the picture would not be complete if one were to omit an extension of the iron grasp of the SS—the trusties.

In all Hitler's concentration camps, beginning with Dachau, the principle of using prisoners in the administration was widely employed. This was not only because it stemmed from an old tradition. The camps swelled in numbers, and during the war exceeded all expected dimensions. Everywhere there was a lack of men, the SS were needed at the front, and more assistance had to be found. So a great network of trusties was developed, which duplicated the work of the SS at almost every level.

The highest in the camp hierarchy was the Camp Senior Prisoner. In Auschwitz, quite exceptionally, this position was shared at first by two criminal prisoners whom Palitzsch brought in May 1940 from Sachsenhausen. By a subtle irony of fate both were Germanized Poles. The first was Bruno Brodniewicz, the second Leo Wiczorek.

Below the Camp Senior Prisoner responsibilities were split into two separate branches: labour and living quarters. The labour was supervised by Kapos,\* at the head of individual Kommandos, under whom were foremen. Several Kommandos might come

---

\* The expression 'Kapo' came from the Italian meaning 'chief', literally 'head'. It was used by Italian workmen making roads in southern Germany. It first caught on in Dachau and from there spread to the other German camps. It was spelled with a 'C', as in the original Italian. [This 2<sup>nd</sup> edition uses the spelling 'Kapo', more common in modern usage.]

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

under one trusty, who then wore the arm-band of an Oberkapo. All the Kapos and foremen in Auschwitz wore yellow arm-bands.

At the head of each block was a block chief, who was responsible for discipline, order and distributing rations. Below him was the barrack-room service, which cleaned out an assigned area of the barracks and wielded clubs. The trusties on the blocks in Auschwitz wore dark-red arm-bands.

Besides these two main branches of the hierarchy there were trusties in every corner of the camp. They were in the stores, the kitchens, the workshops, the building sites; they even managed to get into the Political Department. Formally they were not superior to the other prisoners, but in many cases they were more influential and had more power than Kapos and block chiefs, although, as a rule, they carried no clubs.

The first trusties were recruited solely among criminal prisoners. The SS, which treated political opponents with the greatest brutality, were less strict towards pickpockets and burglars. These, anyway, had had experience of prisons and knew how to set about things; thus they were given all the appropriate jobs.<sup>18</sup>

The reign of criminal prisoners was the most terrible period in the German camps. The SS men, although trained in brutality as part of the camp system, were after all on duty, and when it was over they went into the town or returned to barracks. Only the exceptionally sadistic types stayed on in the camp to torment the prisoners. But with the trusties it was different. They had nowhere to go, so for twenty-four hours a day they reigned over their fellow-prisoners. They knew all their secrets, their relationships and weaknesses. The SS men conformed to certain rules; there was a distance between them and the prisoners. They might even be afraid of informers. Where the trusties were concerned, none of this mattered. The need to stay alive forced solidarity upon

## Auschwitz Camp Senior Prisoners



Bruno Brodniewicz (00001)



Leon Wiczorek (00030)



Electrified barbed wire fences surrounded the camp to prevent escapes and keep outsiders away.

them: their criminal past had taught them to be crafty, there were no standards by which their attitudes to fellow-prisoners were regulated, and ideas of ethical behaviour were on the whole unknown to them. They wanted to live, so they kept alive at the expense of others. They stole food by reducing the helpings doled out; they drove others to work with clubs to avoid it themselves; they spied to earn privileges and save themselves from informers. With very few exceptions, they were zealous enforcers of the system of oppression and terror.

The SS authorities approved of these conditions, for they provided a guarantee that the great mass of prisoners would never escape control and that, hating the thousands of trusties as they did, they were unlikely to form a united front with them. By this method another very important aim was achieved: the internal urge to rebel, which every prisoner was bound to feel, was not always directed against the SS. The criminal parasites were so vexatious that frequently their robbed and maltreated victims blamed them for almost all the crimes committed.

This state of affairs did, however, change as the years passed. The camps got bigger, especially during the war, and absorbed hundreds of thousands of new prisoners, almost exclusively political. Nobody wanted to die without a fight, so there began a struggle for power. The political prisoners began to fight for the privileged positions so far occupied by criminals.

The 'green triangles'\* began to close ranks, and the camp authorities supported them; but the political prisoners' attack was so determined that the safe-breakers and pickpockets occasionally had to sound the retreat. It was not an easy struggle, for it was fought for the right to live, and was carried on in conditions beyond

---

\* In the German concentration camps every criminal prisoner wore a green triangle on his blouse and trousers, while political prisoners wore a red one. Jehovah's Witnesses wore violet triangles, homosexuals pink and 'antisocials' black.

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

the wildest imaginings, and there was no room for fair play.

The first breach in the criminals' line of defences brought with it further losses. Those political prisoners who managed to get jobs in the camp gave a hand to their fellow politicals. Sometimes they were connected by ties of nationality, very often by common political views, almost always by the ideas that had made them oppose Hitler in the first place and had brought them to the camp.

All jobs depended on the SS, so it would seem that theirs would have been the sole decision on the choice of trusties and the colour of their triangles. That was so, but only at the beginning of the Nazi camp era. Later, with the mass influx of prisoners and the speedy build-up of all the camp apparatus, the problem became too big for the SS and the criminal trusties. They had been the first to rule inside the camps because, when these camps were built, they had arrived from local prisons first. They had to be used, because only they had experience. The colossal growth of the camps and the increase in the numbers of political prisoners completely changed the situation. The criminals were not clever enough to organize huge camps, with thousands of prisoners and many complicated problems. Life proved stronger than intentions. The camp authorities had to accept political prisoners as trusties, for they realized that these were better able to cope with such problems as administration, food distribution, organization of labour and supplies. After all, what did it matter if the reds began to push out the greens? They were all going to die in the camp eventually.

In the pre-war Nazi camps, the seizure of the internal centres of power by political prisoners, mainly communists, led to new cliques, gave further opportunities for abuses, and sometimes meant discrimination against those of different political convictions. But on the whole it lessened the terror and brought some relief to the main body of prisoners.

By the time war broke out, the red-triangle prisoners had most influence in the majority of the camps on German soil. But Auschwitz was a new camp. There, in 1940, German criminal prisoners ruled, and it was a long time before this state of affairs was to change.

### **8. Himmler’s Visit to Auschwitz**

In the early spring, on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1941, Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler came to Auschwitz for the first time.<sup>19</sup> Before this visit, in January of the same year, the great chemical concern, I. G. Farben, had proposed that a huge synthetic-rubber plant, Buna-Werke, should be constructed next to the camp. Marshal Göring, who was responsible for the Reich’s economy, accepted the plan and issued an order to the effect that Auschwitz prisoners should be seconded to the corporation as slave labour. The SS would receive payment for this work.<sup>20</sup>

Himmler entered the camp, but he did not even see the prisoners, since they had been locked into their barracks for fear of an attempt on his life. He made a thorough inspection of the preliminary work of the I. G. Farben concern, which was explained by its chief executives, and he then went round the whole area, including the deserted villages from which the Polish inhabitants had been expelled. He stood for a time on the bridge over the railway lines, with a good view over the dismal emptiness of the flat landscape. He remained there in silence, while behind him his retinue stood stiffly and respectfully. In the afternoon, after lunch in the SS hospital canteen, a conference took place.<sup>21</sup>

Himmler presented his plans and gave his orders sharply, positively and with a coldness which paralysed subordinates and terrified listeners. On the site of the village of

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

Birkenau, at a distance of two miles from the camp, there was to be built a new camp for 100,000 people. It was to be for prisoners-of-war. The main Auschwitz camp was to be expanded to take 30,000, and 10,000 prisoners were to be sent to the Buna-Werke.<sup>22</sup>

The Gauleiter (Nazi Party leader) of Silesia, Fritz Bracht, leapt from his chair and began to argue loudly that the plan was quite impracticable. There was no drinking-water on the site; the marshes had not been drained; there were not enough bricks, cement, wire or wood. Himmler stopped him with a decisive movement of his hand: 'Gentlemen, it will be built. My reasons for constructing it are far more important than your objections.'<sup>23</sup>

Work got under way on the gigantic scheme. Teams of prisoners were moved into the area to demolish the empty houses and prepare the ground for the new huts. SS men fanned out among the surrounding towns and villages with orders to collect anything which could be useful for the construction work.

Day after day new transports arrived at the unloading ramp of Auschwitz and deposited new victims in the hostile environment. For the first year they were exclusively Poles except for some Germans, the earliest trusties. However, the principle that the camp was to be used for the terrorizing and extermination of only Poles was soon abandoned. On 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1941, a transport of Czech political prisoners arrived from Brno. The first one to enter the camp gate was given the number 17,045.<sup>24</sup> After the decision to build the Buna-Werke and Himmler's March orders, this was the second crucial date in the camp's history, but not the most important.

Several weeks passed and an urgent message from Himmler was received by the camp commandant Rudolf Höss, who was



## CHAPTER 1 – 8. HIMMLER'S VISIT TO AUSCHWITZ

ordered to report immediately to Berlin.\* Himmler received him with his usual dryness and briefness, ordered his aides to leave the room, and said:

The Führer has ordered that the Jewish question be solved once and for all and that we, the SS, are to implement that order.

The existing extermination centres† in the east are not in a position to carry out the large actions which are anticipated. I have therefore earmarked Auschwitz for this purpose, because the area can be easily both isolated and camouflaged. At first I thought of calling in a senior SS officer for this job, but I changed my mind in order to avoid difficulties concerning terms of reference. I have now decided to entrust this task to you. It is difficult and onerous and calls for complete devotion notwithstanding any difficulties that may arise. You will learn further details from Sturmbannführer Eichmann of the Reich Security Head Office, who will call on you in the immediate future.

The departments concerned will be notified by me in due course. You will treat this order as absolutely

---

\* The precise date is unknown, nor is it given by Höss in his memoirs, which say only 'in summer 1941'. Robert M. W. Kempner in his book *Eichmann und Komplizen*, p.101, says that Adolf Eichmann arrived at Auschwitz in late summer 1941 to discuss with Höss the execution of Himmler's order, and Höss notes in his memoirs that Eichmann arrived very soon after Himmler's order. This suggests that Höss was called to Berlin about August 1941.

† When Himmler mentioned the problem of liquidation centres in the east, he could not have been thinking of Chełmno, Sobibór, Bełżec, Treblinka or Majdanek, since they were all built later. He must have been thinking of the ad hoc sites, which were organized by the Einsatzgruppen, special units, responsible to the chief of police and security. They moved into occupied territory close behind the combat troops with the object of combating all anti-German and anti-Reich elements behind the front. Their efforts were directed above all against Jews, Communist Party members and partisans.

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

secret, even from your superiors. After your talk with Eichmann you will immediately forward to me the plans of the projected installations.

The Jews are the sworn enemies of the German people and must be eradicated. Every Jew that we can lay our hands on is to be destroyed now during the war, without exception. If we cannot now obliterate the biological basis of Jewry, the Jews will one day destroy the German people.<sup>25</sup>

Höss stood still straighter, tried to say something, but Himmler stopped him with an icy look and dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

The commandant returned immediately to the camp, failing to give the usual report to his direct superiors in Oranienburg, and without the slightest delay set about executing the order. Soon afterward Adolf Eichmann arrived and together they went round the area and chose a site for the construction of a gas chamber. This was a deserted farm in the north-west corner of Section B III of the future camp in Birkenau. It was called Bunker No. 1.

The clouds which drifted ceaselessly over Auschwitz—clouds impregnated with blood, suffering, cruelty and violence—thickened and darkened. In their midst grew a thunderbolt, the greatest and most dreadful crime in history; it was soon to strike and shake the world.

But the world did not want to hear it...

## Leading SS Personalities



Hans Aumeier



Richard Baer



Wilhelm Boger



Adolf Eichmann



Maximilian Grabner



Reinhard Heydrich



Heinrich Himmler



Rudolf Höss



Oswald Kaduk



Josef Klehr



Josef Kramer



Dr. Johann Kremer

## Leading SS Personalities



Arthur Liebehenschel



Otto Moll



Gerhard Palitzsch



Oswald Pohl



Dr. Eduard Wirths

## CHAPTER 1 – NOTES



### *Notes to Chapter 1*

- <sup>1</sup> W. Pilecki, report, pp. 1–2; S. Korboński, *Fighting Warsaw*, pp. 48–50.
- <sup>2</sup> W. Pilecki, report, p. 102.
- <sup>3</sup> W. Pilecki, report, p. 1; W. Dering, *T.A.P.*; Zofia Pilecka (Witold’s daughter), report.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Sehn, *Obóz...*, pp. 11–14; F. Kaul, *Ärzte in Auschwitz*, pp. 47–48.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> D. Czech, *Calendar...*, no. 2, p. 82.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> C. Madajczyk, *Polityka...*, pp. 483–493.
- <sup>9</sup> D. Czech, *Calendar...*, no. 2, p. 83.
- <sup>10</sup> J. Sehn, *Obóz...*, p. 16.
- <sup>11</sup> D. Czech, *Calendar...*, no. 2, p. 85; K. Świętorzecki, ‘Stille Nacht...’
- <sup>12</sup> W. Dering, *T.A.P.*, pp. 19–20.
- <sup>13</sup> W. Pilecki, report, p. 2.
- <sup>14</sup> J. Sehn, *Obóz...*, p. 57
- <sup>15</sup> R. Höss, *Wspomnienia...*, p. 287.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> J. Sehn, *Obóz...*, p. 114.
- <sup>18</sup> A. Kamiński, *Hitlerowskie...*, pp. 231–233.

## **FIGHTING AUSCHWITZ**

<sup>19</sup>D. Czech, *Calendar...*, no. 2, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> R. Höss, *Kommandant...*, p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> D. Czech, *Calendar...*, no. 2, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> R. Höss, *Kommandant...*, p. 153.

