



Reading material - IMPULSE Workshop 22.01.2026

Task:

The below information should be used to create a virtual exhibition in a 3D environment during the Workshop. **Please read through the material thoroughly** before the workshop and make notes of any questions you may have regarding the material provided. At the beginning of the workshop, we will have time to answer any questions you may have.

During the workshop, you will be the **curators of a virtual exhibition**. The laundry courtyard will serve as an exhibition space, and you will have to decide how to present and in what order you present the information.

The courtyard of the Auschwitz Laundry:



The current state of the courtyard



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Introduction

Surviving Holocaust documentation consisted primarily of Nazi state authority accounts. Early Holocaust historiography failed to effectively integrate survivors' voices until Saul Friedländer's genre-changing approach.

This new approach, which we adopt here, also enabled the discovery of small acts of resistance and individual self-assertion that had not so far been 'officially' documented. This 'microhistorical' lens enables the reader to more closely understand the regional/local dimensions and multi-layered realities of the Holocaust.

We present here details of the role and fate of selected individuals in the Polish town of Bielsko-Biała, in the context of the laundry of the Auschwitz concentration camp which was located in the town.

The Pedanterie - the Auschwitz Laundry

The **Pedanterie** laundry in Bielsko was a flourishing Jewish-owned business. In 1937, the company's promising trajectory would soon be threatened by the looming war.

With the Nazi occupation, the Pedanterie was swiftly seized and placed under compulsory administration before being taken over by German businessman Gustav Schweizer. Bielsko was renamed Bielitz and began to operate from the (re-named) Hermann-Göring-Straße 63.



Schweizer falsely claimed to the Treuhand Office in Berlin that the previous owners had fled and, despite his low offer, the sale was quickly approved. Under his direction, the Pedanterie was soon integrated into the Nazi war machine, and secured lucrative contracts with the Reich Labour Service (RAD), the Bielitz Army Base administration and the Auschwitz concentration camp. By 1941, up to 65% of the laundry's operations were devoted to laundering garments from Auschwitz.

The first major delivery from the camp arrived in February 1941, transported in an eight-ton SS wagon towing a four-ton trailer. Under heavy SS guard, five Auschwitz prisoners unloaded the filthy bundles—prison uniforms caked with blood, excrement, vomit and lice, many stripped from the bodies of the dead. The laundry operated around the clock in two and later three shifts, increasing its workforce to 118 labourers and six office staff. By mid-1941, deliveries surged from two to four per week, processing up to 4,000 sets of prisoner clothing each time.

The Szpyra Family

In 1932, shoemaker **Józef Szpyra** lived in an annex of the Pedanterie laundry buildings in Biała Krakowska (now Bielsko-Biała), where he also ran a small shoemaking workshop. However, on 23 February 1943, under German occupation, Szpyra was stripped of his right to work independently and was forced to become an assistant in the workshop of German shoemaker Georg Ehresman in Bielsko.

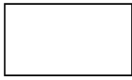
Despite the risks, Szpyra and his family—his wife Antonina and daughters Jadwiga and Józefa—chose defiance over silence. With the cooperation of sympathetic laundry employees, they created a secret communication channel through which Auschwitz prisoners could send messages to their families. From the window of their modest apartment, they had watched with concern the arrival of the first transports of camp linen in February 1941. The brutality of the SS guards toward the prisoners left an indelible mark on Szpyra and his family, compelling them to act.

Szpyra's wife and seven-year-old daughter Jadwiga also witnessed the events. The girl asked her mother about the reason for her mother's distress. Her mother responded: '*Look, Jadziu, how unhappy and poor these people are*'. Jadwiga replied: '*If they are poor, we will help them. Right, Mother?*'

At seven years old, Jadwiga Szpyra became the family's 'liaison officer'. As a seemingly innocuous child, she moved unnoticed, winning the prisoners' trust and eventually serving as their vital link to the outside world. The Szpyra family's resistance efforts were both daring and ingenious. They created a covert communication network, transmitting secret messages hidden under a loose brick in the laundry wall, tucked beneath a carefully placed stone or concealed in their daughter's clothing as she played in the courtyard. Notes were also smuggled inside shoes and soiled laundry, then discreetly relayed by trusted contacts. The family also provided food to prisoners and passed crucial information to their families—including the names of those who had been arrested and sent to Auschwitz.

In a remarkable act of defiance, the Szpyras even arranged for prisoners' family members to visit their apartment, allowing them to glimpse—and, on rare occasions, photograph—their loved ones in the laundry courtyard below.

Observing prisoner movements, Szpyra and laundry worker Jakub Marek realised that two distinct work groups visited the laundry: one on Mondays and Thursdays, the other on



Tuesdays and Fridays. It was only over time—through the sharp eyes and intelligence of the resourceful Jadwiga—that the Szpyras pieced together the prisoners' names, their desperate circumstances, and their whispered wishes for survival. They identified members of these groups, including Bernard Świerczyna, (a close associate of underground leader Witold Pilecki, then imprisoned in Auschwitz).

The Daughter

A key figure in the Szpyra family's underground efforts was **Jadwiga 'Jadzia' Szpyrówna**, the daughter of Józef and Antonina Szpyra. Her courage and innocence allowed her to move unnoticed among the prisoners. Guided by her parents' careful instructions on how to navigate these dangerous waters, Jadzia ignored the SS guards, speaking to the prisoners with a childlike directness that earned their respect and cooperation.

Jadwiga's role as a messenger was vital. She had been carefully briefed by her parents on how to behave around the residents of the property, the laundry workers, the nearby bakery, the guards, and anyone else who could pose a threat. She would leave the house under the pretext of playing with a rag ball in the laundry yard while the prisoners were there. Her first task was to gather information from the prisoners about their personal needs, though at first, the prisoners' natural suspicion made it difficult for her to gain their trust. After each encounter, she would report back to her parents with a detailed account, helping to guide the family's continued efforts to support the prisoners.

Jadwiga initially asked the prisoners:

"Don't you need something from us? We are Poles. We can help you."

To this question, the prisoners answered quickly and firmly in the negative:

"We don't need anything. We have enough of everything".

The Szpyra family understood the delicate balance between providing aid and avoiding detection, aware that the SS guards and the surrounding community were always watching. Despite the dangers, the family was resolute, and they were not discouraged by the prisoners' initial hesitation to reach out.

Józef Szpyra was certain that the prisoners needed help, though their caution kept them from acting impulsively. The Szpyras decided to be patient, continuing to send Jadwiga to the laundry yard with the hope that the prisoners would gain confidence in them. Over time, and through her quiet persistence, she succeeded.

Every visit allowed the family to gradually build trust. Through Jadwiga's innocent interactions—playing with the rag ball and asking simple questions about names, backgrounds, and families—the Szpyras began to learn more about the prisoners' lives.

Soon, Jadwiga could identify many of the prisoners by name, and on several occasions, she pointed individuals out to her parents from the safety of their apartment. Over time, the prisoners started to trust her and, by the summer of 1941, the first tentative steps toward cooperation were taken.

The breakthrough came when Mieczysław Kościelniak, one of the prisoners, found the courage to secretly tuck a message into Jadwiga's clothing, addressed to his fiancée, Irena. From then on, the girl wore a special shirt with a secure pocket sewn by her mother to



transport messages. From that moment on, Kościelniak entrusted Jadwiga with much of his personal correspondence, as well as letters from other prisoners in Auschwitz.

Concealed Letters

Secret letters usually reached **Józef Szpyra** in large numbers. He addressed them according to the attached instructions and sent them by post. The task of mailing these envelopes was usually carried out by his wife Antonina.

Jakub Marek handed Szpyra letters for forwarding that he had found in bundles of dirty laundry. Letters were also concealed in the soles of shoes. Once the messages were in hand, Szpyra carefully placed them in envelopes, addressing them according to the instructions in the prisoners' notes. His wife took charge of mailing them via the regular postal system, while worker Jakub Marek helped by handing over bundles of messages hidden among the dirty laundry stored in the warehouse. The Szpyra family had created an underground lifeline, quietly defying the Nazi regime by sending secret messages between the prisoners and their families.

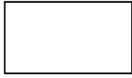
Marek also passed on artworks hidden among the dirty laundry. Each shipment contained several paintings, drawings, and graphic works. The artworks most often depicted scenes from prisoners' lives in Auschwitz as well as portraits. Occasionally there were also designs whose meaning was unknown to the intermediaries.

Photographs showing loved ones were also smuggled out in this way. Through this route, Szpyra received directly from Kościelniak portraits of his daughters, created in the camp based on photographs that had previously been delivered there by the same means. Such artworks smuggled from Auschwitz were also forwarded to Kościelniak's brother and his fiancée.

Letter from Józef Światłoch

"My beloved sister! I am still so impressed by Friday that I simply cannot concentrate my thoughts. I was prepared for everything, but to see Daddy, for that matter. After another late departure from Oświęcim, it was almost eleven o'clock when we stopped by "Patria" in front of the railway station in B[ł]ielsko]. Suddenly, a miracle happens! I see beloved Daddy in the company of Mr and Mrs Kobiela. I recognised everyone immediately and struggled to keep my nerves under control. I couldn't even speak so as not to attract the attention of the two drivers who were sitting in the vehicle. I was electrified by the sight of a grey-haired father watching his son in a striped uniform for the first time after four years. I wanted to jump out and hug and kiss his grey hair.

At the laundry we had more work this time, so I was only able to leave briefly, handing over and collecting the parcel prepared by Mrs Hilda. Towards evening we returned via Czech[owice] to Oświęcim, where, after dividing the letters, I could finally turn to my favourite reading. Above all, I thank you for keeping my ring and for handing the other over to my Jadzia. [...]



Communication system

Within the camp, a covert communication system emerged that formed a fragile but vital lifeline between prisoners and the outside world. At its centre was a secret message box concealed behind a removable brick in the storage area for soiled laundry. Hidden from view and accessible only to those who knew of its existence, this loose brick enabled the discreet exchange of information and allowed prisoners to bypass the strict censorship imposed on camp correspondence. Through this concealed space, information could be passed beyond the camp walls, messages that could not be shared through official channels.

Among the most significant contents transmitted via the hidden box were lists of newly arrested prisoners. These were compiled and smuggled out from the prisoners' office at Auschwitz. For families outside the camp, these messages became a lifeline, offering crucial knowledge about the fate of their relatives, even when the information was painful.

The loose brick and the hidden box were embedded in a wider network of secret communication. Józef Szpyra addressed letters according to notes attached to the correspondence and sent them in an envelope by post. The posting of these dispatches at the post office was usually done by his wife Antonina. Through this system, a simple removable brick became a critical point of exchange, sustaining a tenuous but essential connection between the camp and the outside world.

Remains of the Living

Up to 65 percent of the laundry's total capacity was devoted to prisoners' clothing. The textiles were delivered regularly from the camp under SS guard. Five prisoners from Auschwitz unloaded the shipments: bundles of heavily soiled uniforms, stained with blood, excrement, vomit and lice. Many of these garments had been taken from the dead.

The laundry operated around the clock to cope with the growing volumes. From mid-1941 onward, up to four deliveries per week arrived, each consisting of several thousand sets of prisoners' clothing. According to prisoner accounts, transports of Soviet POWs were already appearing at Auschwitz in July 1941. In late autumn 1941, thousands of uniforms belonging to Soviet soldiers were cleaned and repaired at the Pedanterie, and numerous Soviet identity cards were left behind near the laundry's boiler house. They bore silent witness to the people to whom this clothing once belonged—and to their disappearance.

Food in Auschwitz

The daily caloric rations provided to Auschwitz prisoners were catastrophically insufficient compared to basic human nutritional needs, forming a key component of the Nazi policy of extermination through labour.

Auschwitz prisoners typically received between 1,300 and 1,700 calories per day, though in practice the actual intake was often lower due to theft by prisoner functionaries, spoilage and the inedibility of much of the food. This consisted primarily of a morning portion of *ersatz* coffee or tea, a midday watery soup made from rotten vegetables or turnips, and an evening



ration of black bread (often mixed with sawdust) accompanied by a small portion of margarine, sometimes with a small amount of sausage or cheese.

By contrast, an adult performing moderate physical activity requires approximately 2,000 to 2,500 calories daily just to maintain body weight and basic function. Prisoners forced into hard labour, however, were using between 3,000 and 4,000 calories per day or more, depending on their work assignments. Those working in gravel pits, construction sites, or other physically-demanding working groups, including transferring laundry, faced particularly extreme energy deficits. This deliberate caloric deficit meant that prisoners were literally being starved to death while working. The inadequate rations were not accidental but rather a calculated element of the camp system, designed to extract maximum labour from prisoners before they perished, embodying the Nazi policy of '*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*' - extermination through work.

In response to this privation, the Szpyra family committed themselves to supporting the visiting prisoners by secretly providing food in the form of hot meals, prepared in advance and placed in bowls and pots at carefully chosen locations. Józef Szpyra left bowls of food on the outer windowsill of the laundry room shortly before the expected arrival of the prisoner convoy from Auschwitz.

The prisoners took the food discreetly, as the laundry courtyard was a dangerous place for such activity, exposed to observation by hostile tenants, unfriendly laundry workers and potential informants. To reduce the risk of detection, Szpyra placed the food only moments before the prisoners arrived, limiting the time it remained visible.

Additional food supplies were hidden in other areas of the building. In winter, when SS guards sometimes allowed prisoners to wait in the warmth of the boiler room, food was concealed there. In summer, when prisoners were held in the garage instead, the hiding place was moved accordingly. The frequent relocation of the pot was intended to avoid arousing suspicion.

When an opportunity arose and the guards were distracted, a prisoner would carry the pot of food to the dirty laundry warehouse, where prisoners often rested between shifts or before being transported back to Auschwitz. After the prisoners had departed, the empty pot was returned to Józef Szpyra by employee Jakub Marek. This covert system of food supply continued uninterrupted until the end of the war.

A Glimpse of a Fiancée

In the summer of 1942, a connection was established through the Szpyra family between the prisoner Mieczysław Kościelniak and his relatives. The first message was sent to his fiancée Irena Zdrenka in Świecie.

In early 1943, a secret meeting was arranged through the Szpyras. Kościelniak asked to see his fiancée and his brother Władysław during a delivery of laundry. Careful precautions were taken. While the prisoners worked in the courtyard, Irena and Władysław remained inside the apartment and observed Kościelniak from a distance through the window.



The prisoner recognised his family's presence and communicated silently with glances and smiles. The meeting ended with the prisoners' return to the camp. As a gesture of thanks, Kościelniak later commemorated the event with a portrait of Irena - her fiancée is visible through the window. Further similar encounters followed in the months that came.

Mieczysław Kościelniak recalled these meetings after the war:

In a moment I saw my fiancée Irenka in the window of his flat, and my brother Władysław next to him. The blood drained from my face. I was terrified, because I knew what it threatened them and me with. Silently, we looked at each other from a distance. Brother photographed me through the window. A moment later, I stroked my fiancée's arm, who stepped out into the corridor. I whispered a few words to both of them and, pretending to be indifferent, returned to the car. Did the SS man see the scene? I don't know, Irenka and Władek, however, happily returned home. They then took my sketches, letters and documents with them.

Dangerous Act of Documentation

Using a camera brought from home, Władysław Kościelniak took four photographs from the window of the Szpyra family flat. One image captures his brother, Mieczysław, at the moment he was standing in the back of a lorry, collecting bundles of laundered linen from fellow prisoners. The photographs were taken during the everyday operation of the laundry, documenting an otherwise unrecorded scene of prisoner labour. Władysław drew arrows on the original prints indicating Mieczysław in the photographs, and documented the date as 05.03.1943.

It seems likely that an SS guard was also captured by the camera. The act of photographing from a private apartment window involved considerable risk, as the presence of guards and the strict control of visual documentation made such images extremely dangerous to produce.

A Father Encounters His Son

Adelajda Świerczyna, the wife of the prisoner Bernard Świerczyn, made use of the Szpyra family's apartment several times in order to see her husband at close range during his temporary stays in the laundry courtyard. The contacts were arranged by Franciszek Smolarek, a doctor working in the laundry administration. Józef Szpyra described the encounter:

"Mrs Świerczynowa came with her two-year-old son and, after introducing herself—while I was not at home—asked my wife for permission to remain in the apartment until the arrival of the camp van in which the prisoner, her husband Bernard, would be brought for an appointment with her. Naturally, she immediately asked my wife's permission. When the vehicle arrived and her husband appeared in the courtyard, my wife and Mrs Świerczynowa sent her son and our daughter Józia out into the yard.



The children slowly approached the prisoners. Prisoner Świerczyn also noticed them. He recognised his son and, when the boy approached him, took him in his arms and said something to him. Apparently fearing exposure, the father did not keep his son with him for long; he hugged him tightly and immediately put him down. The children—Świerczyn's son and our daughter Józia—were later taken home personally by my wife.

Świerczyn's wife crossed the courtyard and walked toward the entrance gate. She passed very close to her husband, lightly brushed against him, and continued toward the street. Less than half an hour later she returned to the apartment, slowly crossing the courtyard. The remainder of prisoner Świerczyn's stay in the laundry courtyard was watched by his wife, holding a child in her arms, through the window of our apartment."

Wedding-Rings From Auschwitz

On 18 March 1944, **Józef Światłoch** and his fiancée Jadwiga secretly became engaged in the corridor of a laundry. The ceremony was organized by Hilda Dzikówna, who also acted as master of ceremonies and who provided vigilant guards. During the brief moment, the couple exchanged rings made in Auschwitz. For an instant, they were able to embrace and seal their engagement with a long-awaited kiss.

The Star of David

The Pedanterie laundry was initially located in Biala in a 'large hall with a gallery which had once been an Israelite prayer house', rented by Eljachim Getz Mandelbaum from Krakow and eventually taken over by Henoch Reich.

In June 1935, shortly before the outbreak of WWII, the second Bobover Rebbe **Rabbi Ben Zion Halberstam**, preached to a large crowd from the balcony above the entrance gate to the courtyard. The sermon is described as 'lasting for several hours'.

There are still traces today of a *mezzuzah* (a small parchment scroll containing biblical verses) on a doorway apartment block at the far end of the courtyard.

Prison/Laundry Worker Biographies

Mieczysław Kościelniak

In Auschwitz, the prisoner Mieczysław Kościelniak, who was from Bielsko, sorted shoes and soap in the 'Kanada' storage section of Auschwitz, sorted prints in the printing shop, and found a permanent job transporting dirty laundry to Pedanterie. From February 1942, Kościelniak was also entrusted with works of art in the camp museum, probably founded by



the commandant of KL Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß (1901–1947), for whom he decorated the interior of his house near the camp with works of art for three days in the autumn of 1941. Kościelniak created works of art in the camp museum after completing other tasks, in the afternoons and on Sundays. In the camp, he created over three hundred works, including official commissions from SS men and unofficial portraits of prisoners and their family members, but also forbidden works showing the tragic reality of the camp. He also designed and created murals for the SS restaurant House of Weapons, located opposite the Auschwitz railway station.

In the summer of 1942, Józef Szpyra passed along the first secret message from Kościelniak to his fiancée Irena Zdrenka in Świecie. This marked the beginning of a covert correspondence that would continue throughout the war. From that moment on, Kościelniak entrusted the Szpyras with many more messages for his family—primarily his brother Władysław in Kalisz—and also for other prisoners, whose letters were addressed to families in Kraków, Poznań, and various other cities across occupied Poland.

By early 1943, the Szpyras' role in the prisoners' lives expanded further. One day, after returning home from a meeting with Kościelniak, Jadwiga passed on a request from the prisoner: he wanted to arrange a secret meeting with his fiancée, Irena, and his brother, Władysław. The meeting would take place during the next delivery of dirty linen, when Kościelniak and his family could meet at the Szpyras' flat. Upon hearing this, the Szpyras wasted no time in planning the event, and a month and a half later, the day of the meeting arrived.

The encounter was carefully orchestrated, with every detail considered for the safety of everyone involved. As Kościelniak and his fellow prisoners lingered around a car near the dirty laundry warehouse, Józef Szpyra kept watch from the window. He heard a German woman's voice in the courtyard below, asking about where the laundry was accepted for washing. Her question seemed out of place, and the answer from the stoker, who directed her to the laundry reception point, only added to the confusion. Szpyra suspected that the woman was, in fact, Kościelniak's fiancée, Irena.

Opening the door to the flat, he called to her: "*You are Mietek's fiancée. Please, do not deny it and come inside.*" She entered, confirming that her brother-in-law, Władysław, had stayed outside near the entrance gate. Without wasting time, Szpyra left to bring Władysław to the flat. He found him dressed in Nazi fashion, including a Tyrolean hat, to blend in with the surroundings. "*Your name is Kościelniak. Mrs. Irena is in our flat. Please follow me,*" Szpyra said, leading Władysław to his awaiting family.

Inside, Jadwiga was waiting with the news and quickly relayed it to Kościelniak, who was still at work. The family had devised a clever way for the prisoners to connect with their loved ones—through the windows of the flat. This safe, indirect meeting allowed Irena and Władysław to watch Mietek from afar. As the prisoners worked, transferring bundles of washed linen onto the waiting wagon, Kościelniak would glance toward the windows of the Szpyra flat and smile, silently acknowledging his family's presence. Mieczysław Kościelniak, who was an artist, later drew a graphic depicting this scene: his fiancée sitting by the window with a flower pot, looking out at him standing by the truck.

The meeting continued this way until the prisoners had finished their work and departed for the camp. Afterwards, the visitors quietly left the Szpyra apartment, grateful for the secret connection they had been granted. In a gesture of thanks, Kościelniak later drew a portrait of Irena for the SS guard Rosenberg, who had tacitly allowed the meeting to take place. This



was not the only such meeting; similar encounters were arranged for Kościelniak and his family over the following months. Through their bravery and ingenuity, the Szpyra family provided a rare and precious opportunity for the prisoners to see and connect with their loved ones, even if just for a fleeting moment in the dark heart of war.

Józef Klimczok

Józef Klimczok, a prisoner at the laundry, became an instrumental figure in the development of the underground network within the camp, earning the respect of fellow inmates for his ingenuity and courage. Widely regarded as the founder of the covert communications system, he was likely the mastermind behind the creation of the secret message box hidden behind a removable brick in the soiled laundry storage area. This ingenious device allowed prisoners to pass messages to the outside world, circumventing the strict censorship of camp mail.

Through the hidden box, crucial information found its way to the families of prisoners—details that would have otherwise been impossible to share. Among the most vital messages were lists of newly arrested prisoners, compiled and smuggled out by two key figures: Erwin Olszówka from Chorzów and Tadeusz Wąsowicz from Kraków. Both worked in the prisoner's office at Auschwitz, making them privy to sensitive details, including the arrival of new detainees. These lists provided a lifeline for the families of those trapped within the camp, offering them critical, though often heart-breaking, information.

Relatives desperate for news would line the streets as the Auschwitz camp van passed by. With hope and fear in their hearts, they would peer through the bars of the vehicle, scanning the faces of the prisoners inside. Behind the SS guards, they would search for any sign of their loved ones, clinging to the smallest hint that their family members were still alive. The silent exchange of glances between the prisoners and their families, as fleeting as it was, became one of the few ways to communicate during an otherwise suffocating silence imposed by the brutalities of the camp. This network of hidden messages and secret exchanges formed the fragile yet crucial bridge between those trapped inside and those desperate to reach them.

Wanda Nycz

During the Nazi occupation, Polish women working in German-run laundries faced constant harassment and coercion from SS officers. These officers often made inappropriate advances, pressuring the women into compromising situations. For instance, on June 30, 1944, Wanda Nycz, a Polish worker, received a bouquet of roses from SS officer Rube in the presence of her German employers. This gesture was preceded by love letters full of vain hopes. Embarrassed and appalled, Wanda took the flowers to the church.

Such incidents were part of a broader pattern of sexual harassment and coercion by the occupiers. Despite the German-imposed 'prohibition of contact' (*Umgangsverbot*) with the local Polish population, which restricted both social and sexual encounters, there existed a wide range of sexual contacts between the occupiers and the local inhabitants, including both consensual and forced interactions. These experiences highlight the immense challenges and moral dilemmas faced by Polish women under Nazi occupation, who had to



navigate the constant threat of coercion and maintain their dignity in the face of such oppressive circumstances.

Jan Wilczak

Similarly, the Szpyras also arranged meetings between the prisoner Jan Wilczak and his parents. At the request of Wilczak, visits with his parents took place in the Szpyr flat. The first took place in January or February 1943. Wilczak's parents were waiting in the street, in front of the entrance gate. They were seen by Wilczak as they drove their car into the courtyard of the laundry, while he was helping the prisoners unload dirty laundry into the warehouse. He passed the news to Szpyra, who identified his father, approached him and invited him into the flat. On the way, he carefully instructed him on how to behave in the courtyard and to be as careful as possible, especially when he saw his son. Wilczak also pointed out his mother walking on the opposite pavement, also on her way to the Szpyr flat. Szpyra gave the prisoner's mother the same information and cautions that he had given her husband.

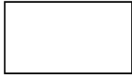
The prisoners were manoeuvring a heavy, loaded trailer in front of the gate of the laundry warehouse. All five prisoners were standing next to the trailer at the time and, as they walked past them at a distance of about two metres, their contorted postures let them know that they knew who was passing them. In the flat, Szpyra found Wilczak senior in a state of complete mental breakdown caused by the sight of his son. Antonina Szpyra later recounted that Wilczak senior crossed the threshold of the flat, after which he collapsed and fainted at the sight of his emaciated son in a striped uniform. Subsequent visits to the Szpyra's apartment, of which there were three or four, took place without such disruptions.

Bernard and Adelajda Świerczyna

The wife of the prisoner Bernard Świerczyna, Adelajda Swierczynowa, née Kierka, also used the Szpyra's apartment five or six times. In her case, the contact person who arranged the visits was Franciszek Smolarek, a doctor who worked in the laundry administration. The first visit to the Świerczyna family by the shoemaker family took place in April 1943:

Józef Szpyra: Ob. Swierczynowa with her two-year-old son and after introducing herself - I was not at home at the time - she asked my wife for permission to stay in the apartment until the arrival time of the camp van in which the prisoner, her husband Bernard, would arrive for an appointment with her. Of course, she immediately asked my wife's permission, and when the car arrived and the husband of the said woman appeared in the yard, my wife and my ob. Świerczynowa sent her son and our daughter Józia out into the yard.

The children slowly approached the prisoners. Prisoner Świerczyn also saw them. He recognized his son, and when he approached him, he took him in his arms and said something to him. The father, apparently fearing to be exposed, did not keep his son with him for long; he hugged him tightly and immediately put him down. The children, i.e. son Świerczyna and our daughter Józia, were later taken home by my wife personally. Swierczyna's wife, on the other hand, crossed the yard and walked towards the entrance gate. She passed right next to her husband, lightly brushed against him and headed towards the street. Not even half an hour had passed and she returned to the apartment, slowly crossing the courtyard. The rest of the prisoner



Świerczyna's stay in the laundry courtyard was watched by his wife with a child in her arms through the window of our apartment.

Władysław Kościelniak

Władysław Kościelniak received information that his imprisoned brother Mieczysław would be working on a specified date at the Pedanterie:

We decided to go together with his then-fiancée. The letter directed us to Bielsko in Hermann-Goering-Strasse [as 11 Listopada was then named]. Early in the morning, exactly

as it was in the letter, we entered a spacious courtyard surrounded on all sides by buildings. To the left of the entrance was the laundry, to the right the outbuildings and the courtyard lavatory. Opposite, where we went, lived the modest shoemaker Szpyra, a clandestine liaison between the prisoners and the 'world'.

After briefly introducing ourselves, but with a lot of caution, the Szpyra family welcomed us, treated us to a modest breakfast and told us to wait for the arrival of a truck with SS linen, which was being brought here for the laundry. Quite punctually, the truck with the so-called "kennel" arrived and stood with its back, i.e. with its open kennel towards the window - this is how we saw Mieczysław in it. [...] This 'meeting' lasted at least two hours. During this time I photographed Mieczysław through the window.

With a camera brought from home, Władysław Kościelniak photographed his brother from the window of his flat. It is likely that an SS man was also captured by the camera's lens at the time. Władysław personally marked the photograph with the date 5 March 1943.

At a later meeting in July or August 1943, Szpyra and Władysław approached Mieczysław who was drinking water from a water supply installed next to the garage. At this time, Mieczysław provided information about the collaborator who had contributed to his arrest, conveyed greetings to his relatives and asked them not to continue such direct contacts for security reasons. From that day on, the visits with him took place from a distance, following the system they had devised.

Witold Piłecki and the ZOW Network

Witold **Piłecki** was a Polish cavalry officer and resistance fighter who undertook to voluntarily enter the Auschwitz concentration camp as a prisoner to gather intelligence and organise resistance from within.

In 1939, Piłecki formed Tajna Armia Polska (TAP), an underground group which later became part of the Polish Home Army. In September 1940, Piłecki agreed to allow himself to be captured during a German street roundup in Warsaw. Using a false identity, he was transported to Auschwitz, at that time still primarily a camp for Polish political prisoners rather than the mechanised death camp it would later become. His mission, coordinated with TAP, was to investigate conditions inside the camp and determine whether a mass uprising or external rescue operation might be feasible.



Once inside, Piłecki set about building a sophisticated resistance network despite the camp's brutal conditions. He organised prisoners into cells of five people, creating a structure that could survive the frequent deaths, transfers and other disruptions. His network, known as the Union of Military Organizations (Związek Organizacji Wojskowej or ZOW), eventually grew to nearly a thousand members across the camp's various sections. The organisation worked to boost morale, distribute extra food and medicine to the weakest prisoners, provide intelligence about SS movements and prepare for a potential uprising.

Piłecki's most crucial contribution was his intelligence work. He managed to smuggle detailed reports out of Auschwitz via released prisoners, via messages concealed in laundered clothing - the Pedanterie route - and other methods. His reports, beginning in 1940 and continuing through 1943, provided the Allies with some of the earliest and most comprehensive accounts of the camp's operations, including information about the mass murder of Jews. These reports described the camp's expansion, the introduction of Zyklon B gas for mass killings and the evolving Holocaust.

Despite his efforts to alert the world, Piłecki grew frustrated that no Allied rescue operation materialised. By April 1943, realising that external help would not come and that his remaining inside was becoming untenable, he escaped with two fellow prisoners during a night shift at a camp bakery. He made his way back to Warsaw, where he continued fighting with the resistance and participated in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising.

Piłecki's voluntary mission into Auschwitz stands as a selfless act of resistance, demonstrating moral courage in the face of unimaginable evil. Following the war, Piłecki was arrested by the communist Polish regime and was executed in 1948 following a show-trial.