

Witold Pilecki stood on the steps of his manor house, watching a car kick up a trail of dust as it drove down the lime-tree avenue toward him. It came to a stop beside the gnarled chestnut tree in the yard.

The summer of 1939 had been so dry that the peasants talked about pouring water on the grave of a drowned man or harnessing a maiden to the plow so that it might rain. Such were the customs of the Kresy, Poland's eastern borderlands. Finally, a massive electrical storm had come, flattening what was left of the harvest. But Witold wasn't worrying about their not having enough grain for the winter.¹

The radio waves crackled with news about German troops gathering on the border with Poland. The führer of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler, had threatened to reclaim territory ceded to Poland in 1918 at the end of World War I.

It was only by the “annihilation of Poland . . . and its vital

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forces,” Hitler told his officers on August 22, that the German people could expand their territory. The next day, Hitler signed a secret nonaggression pact with the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin to divide Poland between them. If they succeeded in their plans, Witold’s home and land would be taken and Poland reduced to vassalage, or destroyed entirely.²

A soldier stepped out of the dusty car with orders for Witold, who was a second lieutenant in the cavalry reserves. Witold had forty-eight hours to deliver his unit to the barracks in the nearby town of Lida, where they would board troop transports bound for the western border. Witold had done his best to train ninety volunteers, but most of his men were peasants who had never seen action or fired a gun in combat. Several of them didn’t own a horse and planned to fight the Germans on bicycle. At least Witold had been able to arm them, with Lebel 8mm bolt-action rifles.³

Witold hurried into his uniform and riding boots and grabbed his Vis handgun from a pail in the old smoke room, where he’d hidden it after catching his eight-year-old son waving it at his little sister earlier in the summer.⁴

He took a moment to adjust his khaki uniform in one of the mirrors that hung in the hallway. The man in the reflection was thirty-eight years old, of medium build and handsome in an understated way, with pale blue eyes, dark blond hair brushed back from a high forehead, and a set to his lips that gave him a constant half smile.

As a young man, Witold had wanted to be an artist and studied painting at the university in Wilno (now Vilnius), only to abandon his schooling in the tumultuous years after World War I. Poland declared independence in 1918 out of the



Witold Pilecki and a friend in Sukurcze, c. 1930.