



Witold Pilecki as a caring parent model from the Erik Erikson's theory perspective

Witold Pilecki jako wzór troskliwego rodzica w świetle teorii Erika Eriksona¹
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Abstract: The subject matter of the paper focuses on the figures of the Steadfast Soldiers as personal role models in upbringing towards higher values. In historical literature, there are many studies dedicated to the Steadfast Soldiers, whereas in psycho-pedagogical literature there have been only a few so far. It is the intention of the author of this paper to reinvigorate scholarly reflection on the educational implications of the biographies of the Steadfast. It is well known that Witold Pilecki, the most famous Steadfast Soldier, was an outstanding patriot. The aim of this paper is to show that he was also a model of a caring parent, inspiring emulation. The article refers to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, with a particular focus on the virtue of care, which makes it possible to resolve the generativity-stagnation crisis typical for middle adulthood and helps to properly perform the task of raising offspring. According to Erikson, a truly caring parent continually develops a tendency to care about people (primarily their own offspring, but also people in general), objects and ideas. The virtue of care manifests itself by going beyond the needs of the self, by acting for the good of future generations, by being authentic. Care helps to cope with the stagnation manifested by excessive focus on oneself and resentment towards others. It has been shown that Witold Pilecki perfectly fulfilled Erikson's listed criteria for genuine caring and is thus a personal role model in education for caring parenthood. The paper uses the biography method. Selected studies and source texts describing Pilecki's life and activities were used, with a special focus on the memoirs of his daughter, Zofia Pilecka-Optulowicz. She portrayed Witold Pilecki as a parent caring for his offspring and other people, a resourceful farmer vigorously engaged in agricultural production and a man devoted to the idea of helping others, selflessly striving to make it a reality.

Key words: parenthood, personal model, care, Witold Pilecki, Erik Erikson

Abstrakt: Tematyka pracy koncentruje się wokół postaci Żołnierzy Niezłomnych jako wzorów osobowych w wychowaniu do wartości. W literaturze historycznej istnieje wiele opracowań poświęconych Żołnierzom Niezłomnym, natomiast w literaturze psychopedagogicznej jest ich na razie zaledwie kilka. Zamierzeniem autora artykułu jest ożywienie naukowych rozważań w kwestii wychowawczych implikacji biografii Niezłomnych. Powszechnie wiadomym jest, że Witold Pilecki, najbardziej znany Żołnierz Niezłomny, był wybitnym patriotą. Celem tego artykułu jest wykazanie, że był również wzorem troskliwego rodzica, inspirującym do naśladownictwa. W artykule odwołano się do teorii rozwoju psychospołecznego autorstwa Erika Eriksona, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem cnoty troski, która umożliwia rozwiązanie kryzysu generatywność-stagnacja charakterystycznego dla średniej dorosłości i pomaga w prawidłowej realizacji zadania, jakim jest wychowywanie potomstwa. Według Eriksona prawdziwie troskliwy rodzic ustawicznie wypracowuje w sobie skłonność do troszczenia się o ludzi (przede wszystkim o własne potomstwo, ale również o ludzi w ogóle), przedmioty oraz idee. Cnota troski przejawia się wyjściem poza potrzeby samego siebie, działaniem dla dobra przyszłych pokoleń, autentycznością. Troska pomaga poradzić sobie ze stagnacją przejawiającą się nadmierną koncentracją na sobie i niechęcią do drugiego człowieka. Wykazano, że Witold Pilecki doskonale spełnił wyszczególnione przez Eriksona kryteria prawdziwej troski i jest tym samym wzorem osobowym w wychowaniu do troskliwego rodzicielstwa. W artykule posłużono się metodą biograficzną. Wykorzystano wybrane opracowania i teksty źródłowe opisujące życie i działalność Pileckiego, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wspomnień jego córki, Zofii Pileckiej-Optulowicz. Przedstawiła ona Witolda Pileckiego jako rodzica troszczącego się o swoje potomstwo i innych ludzi, zaradnego gospodarza prężnie zajmującego się produkcją rolniczą oraz człowieka oddanego idei pomocy bliźniemu, dążącego bezinteresownie do jej urzeczywistnienia.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzicielstwo, wzór osobowy, troska, Witold Pilecki, Erik Erikson

Introduction

In the literature on the crisis of values, it is commonly emphasised that we are now living in an age of consumerism contesting ideals and traditional models of

psychosocial functioning. However, it appears that a certain section of society is resisting the influence of pseudo-values. In search for the highest ideals, people

¹ Artykuł w języku polskim: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2023-1Juro.pdf>

turn to the fascinating and at the same time difficult example of the Steadfast Soldiers (Ostrowska, Stachurska, 2017, p. 12). As many researchers emphasise, this is due to the tragic history of the Steadfast, their outstanding courage and the simultaneous hypocrisy of the authorities of People's Poland towards their heroic achievements (Pilecka-Optulowicz 2017, p. 24; Pluzański, 2015; Wysocki, 2013). For many years, all activities concerning the Steadfast Soldiers were forbidden, including those concerning the reconstruction of their fate and the search for their graves (Pilecka-Optulowicz 2017, p. 12).

The Steadfast Soldiers actively resisted the Sovietisation of Poland by creating structures of the post-war independence anti-communist underground (Nowak, 2022). They had already started their activities during the Second World War, but the most difficult time started for them after the end of the war. The drama of the Steadfast was that, for them, the war was still going on, despite the immense fatigue of the earlier six-year occupation, hunger, fighting, cold and endless staring into the eyes of death. As highlighted by Wioletta Ostrowska and Emmanuela Stachurska: „The nation (...) diminished by a few million irreplaceable Absentees, did not have the power to reject the shell of Soviet occupation, but underneath, as always, the lava was boiling. The former invader knew—the replacement of the tsarist regime with communist rule changed nothing here—that Poles would not give up so easily. It was drilling, looking for lava. And the invader came across the burning campfire of Witold's group. Such people needed to be destroyed. It was known that since they had fought heroically for freedom against the Germans, they would fight just as fiercely against the Soviet system” (Ostrowska, Stachurska, 2017, p. 11).

As already mentioned, for many years the history of the Steadfast was surrounded by silence and hypocrisy of the authorities of People's Poland. As late as the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century, their biographies were known mainly among historians. It was only a decade or so ago that figures such as Witold Pilecki, Inka Siedzikówna, Emil Fieldorf or

Łukasz Ciepliński began to appear in the broadly understood media. Papers that acknowledge the perseverance of the Steadfast Soldiers, their heroism and fidelity to their ideals are also gradually appearing in the psycho-pedagogical literature. Among the authors of such studies, it is worth mentioning Karolina Sabat, who has analysed the biographies of the Steadfast with a particular focus on their steadfastness and courage (Sabat 2018), referring to such unique source materials as requests for pardon (Sabat, 2016). More recently, Weronika Juroszek has also analysed the biography of General Fieldorf 'Nil' (Juroszek, 2022) and has shown that August Emil Fieldorf is the epitome of a truly mature man who mobilises his pupils to emulate him. She defined maturity in a personality context, citing, after Zdzisław Chlewiński, its three determinants: treating a person as a person, autonomy in thinking and acting, and the ability to have an honest insight into the motives for one's actions.

This paper focuses on the issue of personal role modeling in upbringing towards caring parenthood. The biography method was applied (Szulakiewicz, 2015a, 2015b). Reference was made to the biography of Witold Pilecki, the most famous Steadfast Soldier, based primarily on the memoirs of his daughter, Zofia Pilecka-Optulowicz (2017). The description of Witold Pilecki's parental care uses the theory of Erik Erikson, who detailed caring as a virtue necessary to overcome the generativity-stagnation crisis typical for middle adulthood and coinciding parenthood. (Erikson, 1997, 2012).

Erik Erikson (1902-1994), an American psychologist of Danish origin, is the founder of the theory of psychosocial development. As a disciple of Anna Freud, he drew on the rich Freudian scientific background in the field of psychoanalysis in his theory. The psychoanalytic roots are evident in the reference to terms such as conflict, crisis.

Erikson detailed eight developmental crises that are experienced by humans over the course of their lives². In other words, the developing human being (whether he or she wants it or not) is faced with

2 These crises are as follows: basic trust–basic distrust (basic virtue: hope); autonomy–shame, doubt (basic virtue: will); initiative–guilt (basic virtue: firmness); productivity–feeling of inferiority (basic virtue: competence); identity–identity dispersion (core virtue: fidelity); intimacy–self-absorption (core virtue: love); generativity–stagnation (core virtue: caring); ego integrity–despair (core virtue: wisdom) (Erikson, 2012).

successive tasks which they must successfully solve. For the period of middle adulthood, the generativity-stagnation crisis is characteristic, and the basic virtue (vital force) for resolving this crisis is care.

Caring involves an attitude of constant readiness to help. This help is embodied in interpersonal relations spanning over several generations, both younger and older. A truly helpful person engages with those around them, contributing something personal for their benefit. Such an attitude protects against emptiness and despair, particularly that resulting from an unconstructive solution to another crisis which arises in old age (Sękowski, 2022).

Stagnation is characterised by excessive focus on oneself (one's concerns and wellbeing), egocentrism, and lack of commitment to the concerns of others. Generativity, on the other hand, manifests itself by creatively supporting others to grow.

The aim of this paper is to show that Witold Pilecki, the most famous Steadfast Soldier, brilliantly resolved the generativity-stagnation crisis by shaping the virtue of caring in himself. This care, directed creatively, authentically and altruistically towards other people, objects and ideas, was fully implemented in his parenting. Thus, Pilecki can be promoted among young people, alongside the model of a patriot, also as a model of a loving, caring father. By reading his biography, young people may be inspired by his model of fatherhood and want to emulate it. Such is the purpose of role models, i.e. people whose actions and qualities are considered worthy of emulation: they influence the emotional and volitional sphere of the other person (spectator, observer), mobilising them to emulate. (Bakiera, Harwas-Napierała, 2016; Maj, 2006; Okoń, 2007; Olbrycht, 2014; Wróblewska, 2021).

1. Biography of Witold Pilecki

Witold Pilecki was born on 13 May 1901 in Ołonec, a town located in Karelia—the north-western part of Russia. Witold's father, Julian Pilecki, a graduate of the Forestry Institute in St. Petersburg, worked as a forester in Karelia. He settled in Ołonec, where he also met and married Ludwika Osiecimska (Pawłow-

icz, 2017, p. 24). The spouses had five children: Maria, Józef, Witold, Wanda and Jerzy. After some time, the Pilecki family settled in Vilnius.

After the outbreak of the First World War and the occupation of Vilnius by the German army, the Pilecki family settled in Hawryłków (Mogilev region). It was there that Witold became involved in scouting activities, including founding his scout troop. In 1917, Polish scouting came out of the underground and the scouts gradually made their way into the territory of the recovering Polish state. As Poles from the Borderlands, however, they still had to fight for freedom. Pilecki operated as part of the Vilnius Self-Defence units founded by General Władysław Wejtko. Together with the unit of the 13th Uhlan Regiment commanded by Jerzy Dąbrowski (the famous "Łupaszka"), he participated in the most important battles of that unit. He fought alternately against the Germans, Ukrainians, Belarussians and Bolsheviks in the battles for: Brest, Lida, Baranavichy, Lithuanian Minsk (Pawłowicz, 2017, p. 25). During the Bolshevik War, he took part in the defence of Grodno, and together with the 211th Uhlan Regiment he fought at Płock, Mława, Chorzele, Druskininkai, Stowbtsy and Koidanowa (Pawłowicz, 2017, p. 26). In October 1920, he also took part in the Vilnius expedition of General Lucjan Żeligowski. After the end of hostilities, he was demobilised.

In the inter-war period, he began his studies at the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius (Faculty of Fine Arts), but for mainly financial reasons he abandoned his studies. Ultimately, he studied by correspondence at the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Poznań (Pawłowicz, 2017, p. 26). At the same time, he was constantly taking part in reserve exercises in the 26th Cavalry Regiment and from 1931 in the Cavalry Training Centre in Grudziądz (Pawłowicz, 2017, p. 27).

In 1931, he married Maria Ostrowska, a public school teacher. They had two children, Andrzej (born 1932) and Zofia (born 1933).

In September 1939 Pilecki joined the war as a platoon commander. After the defeat of the September Campaign, he disbanded his platoon and began working in the underground. He was a co-organiser of the Polish Secret Army (TAP), in which he became chief

of staff and inspector of the organisational division, and later during the war he became deputy commander of the Kedyw Home Army brigade (Wysocki, 2013). Witold Pilecki's most famous endeavour during the Second World War was to voluntarily conduct intelligence activities at the Auschwitz concentration camp³. The aim was, as Witold Pilecki himself wrote in his "Reports from Auschwitz": to keep the spirits of the prisoners up by providing and disseminating news from the outside, to organise, as far as possible, the food supply for the prisoners, to pass news to the outside, and to prepare his own troops to take control of the camp (Pilecki, 2016). Pilecki sent reports on these activities to the headquarters of the command in Warsaw and to the West. For this activity he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant by Home Army Commander General Stefan "Grot" Rowecki (Pawłowicz, 2017, p. 36). In February 1944, he was promoted to the rank of Cavalry Captain for the heroism he displayed in the camp (Wysocki, 2013).

After escaping from the camp, in the middle of 1943, Pilecki continued his conspiratorial work within the underground organization "Niepodległość" (*Eng. "Independence"*) (code-named "NIE") and later in the Warsaw Uprising. He became the commander of the 2nd Company of the 1st Battalion. He fought in the vicinity of Wola (the areas of Towarowa, Pańska, Miedziana and Żelazna Street and Starynkiewicz Square). The areas he defended became known as 'Witold's Redoubt'. The redoubt was not conquered by the Germans and was one of the longest defended redoubts of the uprising. After the war, he was accused and sentenced to death on the basis of false charges. During his imprisonment he was cruelly, bestially tortured. Pilecki's testicles were crushed, his fingernails ripped off and he was impaled on stool legs (Płuzański, 2015). Pilecki himself said that compared to what he was going through then, "Auschwitz was a child's play" (Płuzański, 2015). One witness claimed that he did not even know if Pilecki was still alive when two guards were dragging him to the execution (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 114). The sentence was finalised on 25 May 1948 by shooting (shot in the back of the head).

2. Witold Pilecki as a model of a parent caring for his offspring and others

Erik Erikson described care as a constantly shaped, reinforced tendency to care about people, objects and ideas. In other words, caring makes it possible to form an attitude of generativity, by definition focusing on bringing new beings into existence (pro-creativity), creating objects (productivity) and ideas (creativity).

For Erikson, the mere fact of being a biological parent or wishing to bear offspring does not yet confirm an attitude of genuine caring. Authentically caring is the parent who loves not only his or her own biological children, but is able to commit heartily to a meeting with each and every child. Thus, Erikson turns towards a universal understanding of caring focused on trying to help all children, not just a selected few representing a narrow group of society (e.g. from intelligentsia families of noble birth). While analysing the attitude of genuine care, Erikson goes even further and says that it is actually the ability to care about people in general that is most important. Therefore, caring in its highest form manifests itself in the ability to show it to broader groups or communities, bringing it all de facto to compliance with the universal principle of caring for the welfare of one's fellow man and making the highest values a reality.

Witold Pilecki most certainly met these difficult criteria. At this point it is worth quoting the following words of his daughter, confirming the greatness of his humanity and incredible kindness: "My father gave proof with his whole life that he was not only a good soldier, but above all a good man" (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 67). And here are her further words: "He was a wonderful father! I wonder if he knew he had so little time..." (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 69).

Witold Pilecki distinguished himself as a parent exceptionally concerned about the development of his children: he taught them discipline, order and to follow certain rules. He also taught them to plan their responsibilities and to fulfil them. In his attitude he was demanding but at the same time warm and

³ Pilecki was in the camp from September 1940 until April 1943 (Wysocki, 2013).

empathetic. As his daughter Zofia confirms: “From a young age, he taught us to keep order, to take on responsibilities appropriate to our age. Every morning had its own rhythm. A loving father who was able to discipline his children in such a wonderful way—that’s something extraordinary. Even when he wasn’t with us, he would prepare an agenda for us, so we did what he wanted us to do” (Pilecka-Optulowicz, 2017, p. 72).

Pilecki’s daughter also states that her father’s exceptional care became evident, among other things, shortly after her birth, when her mother, very weakened by the birth, fell ill with tuberculosis and pneumonia. Shortly afterwards, she left for an extended medical treatment. Witold Pilecki was left alone with his one-year-old son and newborn Zosia: “He was helped a little by his mother, my grandmother, but because I was very petite at birth (...) my father was very worried about me and took care of me himself. He fed me himself with diluted cow’s milk, and it must be said that the milk was excellent, so I grew well and was as plump as a Masovian dumpling” (Pilecka-Optulowicz, 2017, p. 78-79).

The word “care” used in the context of Pilecki’s attitude as a parent appears dozens of times in his daughter’s memoirs, also in reference to the punishments he used. Zofia described an incident when she and her brother broke a valuable mirror. Witold Pilecki then became very upset and gave them as many spankings as there were cracks on the mirror. Zofia states that, however strange it may sound, this punishment was in a way kind to them, seen as an expression of the father’s concern for his children (Pilecka-Optulowicz, 2017, p. 73). Her father’s care was manifested with great warmth and she herself finds it difficult to agree with the image (so often portrayed in the media) of Witold Pilecki as a stern soldier in a uniform: “He was warm, he often hugged us, and not only us, he loved children and young people in general. The way his fellow sufferers regarded him, whether in the Warsaw Uprising or in captivity at Lamsdorf and Murnau, is the best proof of that. Because he was caring, he worried about others” (Pilecka-Optulowicz, 2017, p. 73).

Pilecki’s care, a man who was a role model in parenthood, was manifested not only towards his children, but also towards his ageing mother. As Zofia states, her father took care of Ludwika Pilecka née Osiecimska (he was even a nurse for her) until her death in 1939.

Witold Pilecki stood out as a great father, but he did not limit himself in his attitude only to his offspring. For other people, including the simple and uneducated, he was also able to be caring and empathetic. Referring to Erik Erikson’s theory, it can therefore be said that he was concerned with the wellbeing of each person and thus realised the value of care in its highest form. As an example, it is worth citing situations where Pilecki avoided parties ending at three or four in the morning, as he knew that at this hour many farmers go to work in the fields. He felt that it was inappropriate to party and then, while returning by carriage from the party, pass peasants going to hard work. Zofia Pilecka-Optulowicz points out that her parents, both her father and mother, could not imagine such a situation, as they had great sensitivity to the hardship, injustice and suffering of a simple man.

Pilecki provided his children with a sense of security. Zofia and Andrzej were aware that their father loved them above his own life, but he also showed a lot of heart to other people. In this sense, his attitude contradicted the reluctance to care for others characteristic of stagnation. This resentment, as Erikson points out, tends to be directed towards people who are treated as ‘outsiders’⁴. Pilecki distanced himself from creating such divisions. He was able to include the farmers working on his estate and those living in the surrounding villages into the group of people perceived as “his own”. They became his ‘loved ones’, those with whom he shared everything he had. His daughter points out that many social initiatives were funded by her father with his money. And here are her words: “My father cared about people, he was a humanist, a community worker. The initiatives he set up he financed with money from our estate. Also the army he created. My mother told us that

4 Erikson emphasised that for people affected by stagnation, resentment towards people often takes the form of a division between ‘their own’ and ‘outsiders’ (Erikson, 2012, p. 84). As resentment grows, the group of ‘outsiders’ becomes larger and larger.

there was often no money even for decent shoes for us. There could be no question of luxuries, because my father spent most of his money on developing our community and environment, and I must admit, I am glad he did" (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 67).

3. Witold Pilecki as a model of a resourceful father—a farmer who cares about the development of agricultural production with consideration for the welfare of others

According to Erik Erikson's concept, a caring father cares for his offspring (extending his concern to other people) as well as objects and ideas. This part of the paper will describe how Witold Pilecki was concerned with the development of, among other things, the family farm and other initiatives. He acted resiliently, showing great reliability and diligence with an eye to the welfare of others. The literary sources emphasise that one of the three basic functions of the father in the family (in addition to procreative and child-rearing) is to ensure the family's livelihood and protection, including materially (Jankowska, 2010).

The area in which Pilecki realised himself as a resourceful, preventive father was the ruined Sukurcze estate, recovered after several years of efforts. Pilecki rebuilt and modernised the estate over a few years. Eventually, he was able to create a beautiful, solid home for his family: "My father raised the estate from ruin, rebuilt it, did everything to create a wonderful home for us. I can safely say that for the six years we lived together in Sukurcze, I was in heaven; then I found myself in hell as well, but that's another story" (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 66).

Pilecki's care manifested in the sphere of production materialised in the context—and this is of great importance in the light of the present considerations—of the wellbeing of others. Pilecki took further professional initiatives by considering the needs of other people. One such initiative was the cultivation of clover and the establishment of a local dairy. Pilecki noticed the needs of the local farmers, exploited by rich merchants coming from big cities, such as Vilnius

or Lida. At this point it is worth quoting the following words of Zofia Pilecka-Optułowicz: "To the poor farmers of Sukurcze, who bent down to the ground in the sweat of their brow, striving for the crops of the land, making milk, cheese, butter—and these were first-class products—merchants from Vilnius and Lida would come and buy these goods for a pittance, only to later sell them much more expensively in Vilnius" (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 67).

Farmers accepted these undercut prices because they had no choice. They needed money for basic needs and had no other options to sell their goods. As his daughter Zofia further recalls: "My father could not watch this exploitation" (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 67). Eventually, he set up a dairy, became its president and, together with the farmers, set prices for the products he produced so that everyone could be fairly paid for their hard work. The farmers repeatedly thanked him for this initiative.

Bringing to life new beings, creations, ideas should be done, according to Erikson, in a spirit of kindness towards other people, including representatives of the younger generation (Erikson, 2012). A generation that needs help and strength from the years lived and the experiences of older, wiser, more mature people (Wójciszewski, 2020). Lech Witkowski, a long-time researcher of the issue of developmental phases in terms of Erik Erikson's psychodynamic model, draws attention to the important issue of intergenerational vitality (generativity) and its creative contribution to the development of subsequent generations.

Pilecka-Optułowicz emphasises that her father, when undertaking various production initiatives, was guided by the will to ensure adequate living conditions for his biological offspring, but his motivation should be understood more broadly, as he also took into account the needs of local farmers and their children. He tried to help them all. He wanted the production he developed to serve them too. In this sense, his vitality (generativity) manifested itself in pro-socially oriented ventures, including those in the area of production. Crucially, he sought to ensure that farmers and their children learned to optimise their own activities. Therefore, this was not a onetime assistance devised for the 'here and now', but was a manifestation of a broad-

er, more forward-looking motivation. Motivation leading to planned activities, including those that cost him a lot and consumed a lot of his strength, such as undertaking agricultural studies. And here are the words of his daughter Zofia: “My father realised that establishing a dairy cooperative was not enough, people had to be taught farming and trade. He was a teacher agronomist. In order to teach others, he first had to gain knowledge himself, so he went to study agriculture in Poznań in absentia” (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 67).

He shared his knowledge gained from his studies with the farmers. He passed on to them all the books and scientific scripts he possessed. And once again, it is worth quoting the words of his daughter, with which she emphasises her father’s kind, creative attitude towards the people he cared for: “He was learning not for himself, but for others, so that these people would be enlightened, because the Eastern Borderlands, Vilnius, were very neglected” (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, s. 68).

A creative (life-giving), kind-hearted educator, with his authenticity and sensitivity, shapes the attitudes of the representatives of the younger generation, who, observing him and experiencing kindness on his part, change themselves, orienting their lives according to the guideposts set by him.

The caring help shown to the people of Sukurcze evoked their love for the one from whom they experienced this help. A love that stayed with them forever and resurfaced when they met his relatives: “When my brother went to Sukurcze years later, people would come to him to give him the books they had once borrowed from my father. In Sukurcze everyone loved Witold Pilecki very much, us too, my mother as a teacher” (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 68). These people recalled the caring attitude, commitment and all that they owed to Pilecki. They emphasised that he was able to motivate people to change their lives. Their attachment had already manifested itself earlier, on 17 September 1939, when the locals warned the Pileckis family about the deportation to the gulag. As Pilecka-Optułowicz recalls: “Everyone wanted to protect us and take us to their home so we wouldn’t be deported to Siberia” (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 68).

Pilecki’s daughter emphasises that her father inspired others, including herself, to emulate him. He was able to evoke admiration in his pupils by his example, and inspire them to take similar actions in the future. Many farmers, observing Pilecki’s attitude, modelled themselves on him.

Witold Pilecki was honoured for his attitude of care with the Silver Cross of Merit, received in 1937. The justification referred to his involvement in public, social issues (Pawłowicz, 2017, p. 27). It is a well-known fact that even the highest honours can sometimes go to people in whom, despite their pro-social tendencies, their own ambitions, aspirations, desires for fame and success come first. In Pilecki’s case, his commitment to others was determined by their welfare. Pilecki’s intentions were entirely altruistic.

4. Witold Pilecki as a model of a parent faithful to the highest ideals, acting selflessly to make them a reality

A genuinely caring educator not only embraces certain ideas, but is capable of reflecting on them and considering them carefully in terms of values and—as far as possible—making them a reality (Erikson, 2012; Kostkiewicz, 2020; Rynio, 2018; Witkowski, 2015). In the light of the literature on the subject, as well as the considerations presented in the previous paragraphs, Witold Pilecki appears to be a person who professed and realised the highest ideas. One of them was to act according to the principle of loving your neighbour. “Love your neighbour as yourself” was the guiding idea, which determined the direction and purpose of his actions.

Erikson claimed that a truly caring parent, when supporting their children in their development, does so within a wider context, in this case, an ideological context. In Pilecki’s case, this care materialised in a perfect, exemplary way. Zofia Pilecka-Optułowicz emphasises that her father’s voluntary entry into a concentration camp had just such an ideological basis related to love of neighbour: “For me, it is unbelievable that with such a great sensitivity to

beauty and an exceptional appreciation of everything that surrounded him, my father managed to survive the hell that was the concentration camp, to which, after all, he went voluntarily to act there for the good of others” (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 66). In the daughter’s opinion, this quality of Pilecki’s self-sacrifice, i.e. a constantly activated will to act for the good of others, is the key to understanding this unique mission of his.

Another idea that Pilecki was guided by in his life boils down to the well-known words: God, Honour, Homeland. He passed them on to his children in the form of this motto: “Love your native land. Love your sacred faith and the traditions of your own people. Grow into men of honour, always faithful to the highest values you recognise, which you must serve your whole life” (Pawłowicz, 2017, p. 39).

In his care for ideas, Witold Pilecki was genuine, authentic. Pilecki’s authenticity was the result of, among other things, a patriotic upbringing, in which it was emphasised that one should sacrifice oneself for the homeland and the wellbeing of its citizens. Patriotism was treated as a duty, a task, which had to be performed if such a need arose. It is worth emphasising that the patriotism of the time consisted not only in empty declarations. Particularly in the fates of many Polish insurgents, one can find an exemplary compatibility between declared love for the homeland and actual actions, which were giving up one’s property (and often one’s life) to save the homeland.

Pilecki grew up in just such a truly patriotic family with noble roots. Witold’s grandfather, Jozef Pilecki, who bore the Leliwa coat of arms, was exiled to Siberia for his participation in the January Uprising, where he spent seven years (Wysocki, 2013). The Russians also deprived him of a large part of his property, which was a typical manifestation of the Tsarist Russia’s punishment of Poles for their patriotic stance (Wysocki, 2013). It is significant that both the insurgents themselves and their descendants supported each other in nurturing the insurgent traditions. The insurgents did not regret

their fate, and their children and grandchildren did not resent their ancestors for their participation in the fight for independence and the consequent impoverishment of the whole family. What’s more, on the example of Pilecki’s mother, Ludwika Pilecka née Osiecimska, one can analyse the consistent, unwavering process of propagating patriotic attitudes, which she conducted. Ludwika Pilecka used to tell her children stories about the persecution of Poles by the Tsarist Russia: their heroic sufferings, exiles and poverty (Wysocki, 2013). She read novels to them written by Henryk Sienkiewicz (above all the “Trilogy”), stories about the January Uprising richly illustrated with drawings by Artur Grottger (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 142). In such a patriotic atmosphere Witold Pilecki was brought up, whose personality had been shaped for years in a spirit of true dedication to his Homeland. In this sense, in Pilecki’s upbringing there was an absolute correlation between the patriotic declarations of his educators and the actions taken by them.⁵ Pilecki very early proved with his deeds that he was a true patriot. Already at the age of 12, he joined a scouting organisation banned by the Russian authorities, in which he learned the observance of duties, physical and mental endurance, and basic principles of conspiracy (Wysocki, 2013).

Pilecki’s authenticity, understood as a love of truth, distancing himself from any lie, was confirmed by his daughter in her memoirs: “It was not allowed to lie, my father abhorred lying. He asked: ‘If you even do something terrible, don’t lie. Don’t be afraid and tell about it.’ For us it would have been unimaginable to deceive our father, he sensitised us to the fact that even if we knew we were going to get some kind of punishment, we had to tell the whole truth. That lesson has stayed with me to this day” (Pilecka-Optułowicz, 2017, p. 72). These words confirm the regularity described by Erikson that genuine caring involves authority (Erikson, 2012). A parent who is genuinely caring becomes someone the child holds in high esteem, someone the child wants to emulate and follow the principles they preach.

⁵ The issue of compatibility between actions and declarations (authenticity) is explored more broadly by the following authors: K. Denek (2010), M. Gajderowicz (2018); M. Strembska-Kozieł (2022); H. Wróblewska (2021); J. Żaryn (2020; 2022), A. Życzok (2021). The titles of the studies can be found in the bibliography.

Conclusion

Witold Pilecki perfectly fulfilled the criteria for true care listed by Erik Erikson and can be placed as a personal model in upbringing for caring parenthood. In showing care, he was authentic, constantly transcending himself and reaching out to the needs of other people.

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