



A FILM BY MACIEJ BARCZEWSKI

THE CHAMPION OF AUSCHWITZ

FIGHTING FOR HOPE



ABOUT THE MOVIE

'He fought and gave hope'

It is 1940. The first transport of prisoners arrives at the newly created concentration camp Auschwitz.

One of them is Tadeusz "Teddy" Pietrzykowski, pre-war boxing champion of Warsaw. The camp officers force him to fight in the ring for his and other prisoners' lives. However, his every win strengthens the hope that Nazis are not invincible. Auschwitz officers notice the growing resistance. The confrontation with the authorities of the camp becomes inevitable.

'The Champion' tells an unknown story of one of the first inmates of camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, prisoner number 77.

During his 3-year stay in the camp, Tadeusz 'Teddy' Pietrzykowski fought over 40 victorious duels, becoming a symbol of hope for victory over Nazi terror. His on-screen history has been documented in detail based on archival statements of former prisoners of Auschwitz and the memories of the boxer himself.

2021 - DRAMA - POLAND - 91 MINUTES - GERMAN AND POLISH LANGUAGES

A man in a boxing ring, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and striped pants, stands in the center. He has a serious expression and is looking towards the left. He is wearing brown boxing gloves. The ring is surrounded by ropes and wooden posts. In the background, two soldiers in dark uniforms and caps are sitting on a bench, watching the man. The setting appears to be a prison or a camp, with stone walls and wooden beams.

«The Champion is a story about an extraordinary man who, thanks to his skills, not only fought for his life in the place of extermination, but also gave others hope that their tormentors were not invincible.»

Maciej Barczewski, director

«Tadeusz 'Teddy' Pietrzykowski was a man who, thanks to a strong will to survive and a passion for boxing, has shown that even the greatest, unimaginable evil can be defeated.»

Piotr Głowacki, actor

CAST

PIOTR GŁOWACKI	Tadeusz "Teddy" Pietrzykowski
GRZEGORZ MAŁECKI	Rapportführer
MARCIN BOSAK	Lagerführer
MARIAN DZIĘDZIEL	Rotmistrz
PIOTR WITKOWSKI	Walter
RAFAŁ ZAWIERUCHA	Klimko
MARCIN CZARNIK	Bruno
JAN SZYDŁOWSKI	Janek
MAREK KASPRZYK	Ernst
KAMIL SZEPTYCKI	Kropp
MARIANNA PAWLISZ	Helcia
ZBIGNIEW PATERAK	Doctor
AGATA MIENIUK	Ana
MIŁOSZ KWIECIEŃ	Rudi
DANDRIS	Bumbo
MICHAŁ PLUSKOTA	Hammerschlag
KONRAD OSTROWSKI	Max
HUGH HANLEY	Officer from Neuengamme





CREW

MACIEJ BARCZEWSKI Director
MACIEJ BARCZEWSKI Scriptwriter
WITOLD PŁÓCIENNIK PSC Director of photography
BARTOSZ CHAJDECKI Music
LESZEK STARZYŃSKI PSM Editing
MARIUSZ BIELECKI Sound
JAROSŁAW BAJDOWSKI
TOMASZ DUKSZTA
EWA SKOCZKOWSKA Production design
ALEKSANDRA DZIÓBEK Costumes
MIROSŁAWA WOJTCZAK Makeup
ALEKSANDRA GRUBER Casting director
PAULINA BAREŃSKA Production management
KRZYSZTOF SZPETMAŃSKI Producers
LESZEK STARZYŃSKI
IRON FILMS Production
TELEWIZJA POLSKA S.A., Co-production
CAVATINA GW, HARDKOP, MOOVI
POLSKI INSTYTUT Co-financing
SZTUKI FILMOWEJ
LOCO FILMS World sales

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE ROLE OF SPORT IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS

The consequence of the liquidation of the Polish state by the German Reich was the ban on sports institutions perceived as a habitat of patriotism. Athletes, as a dangerous element, were sent to concentration camps, including KL Auschwitz. Hence, in the first transport of Poles to KL Auschwitz in 1940, there were many representatives of the sports world, including Tadeusz Pietrzykowski (camp number 77) - a boxer, and skiers: Bronisław Czech (camp number 349) and Izydor Łuszczek (camp number 783).

As a result of the plan approved at the Wannsee conference in 1942, the "final solution to the Jewish question" (Endlösung der Judenfrage), was the deportation of the Jewish population, including sportsmen, to extermination camps. Only a few became prisoners. Most during the selection process were found worthless and incapable of work, which was tantamount to a death sentence in gas chambers.





HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE ROLE OF SPORT IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS

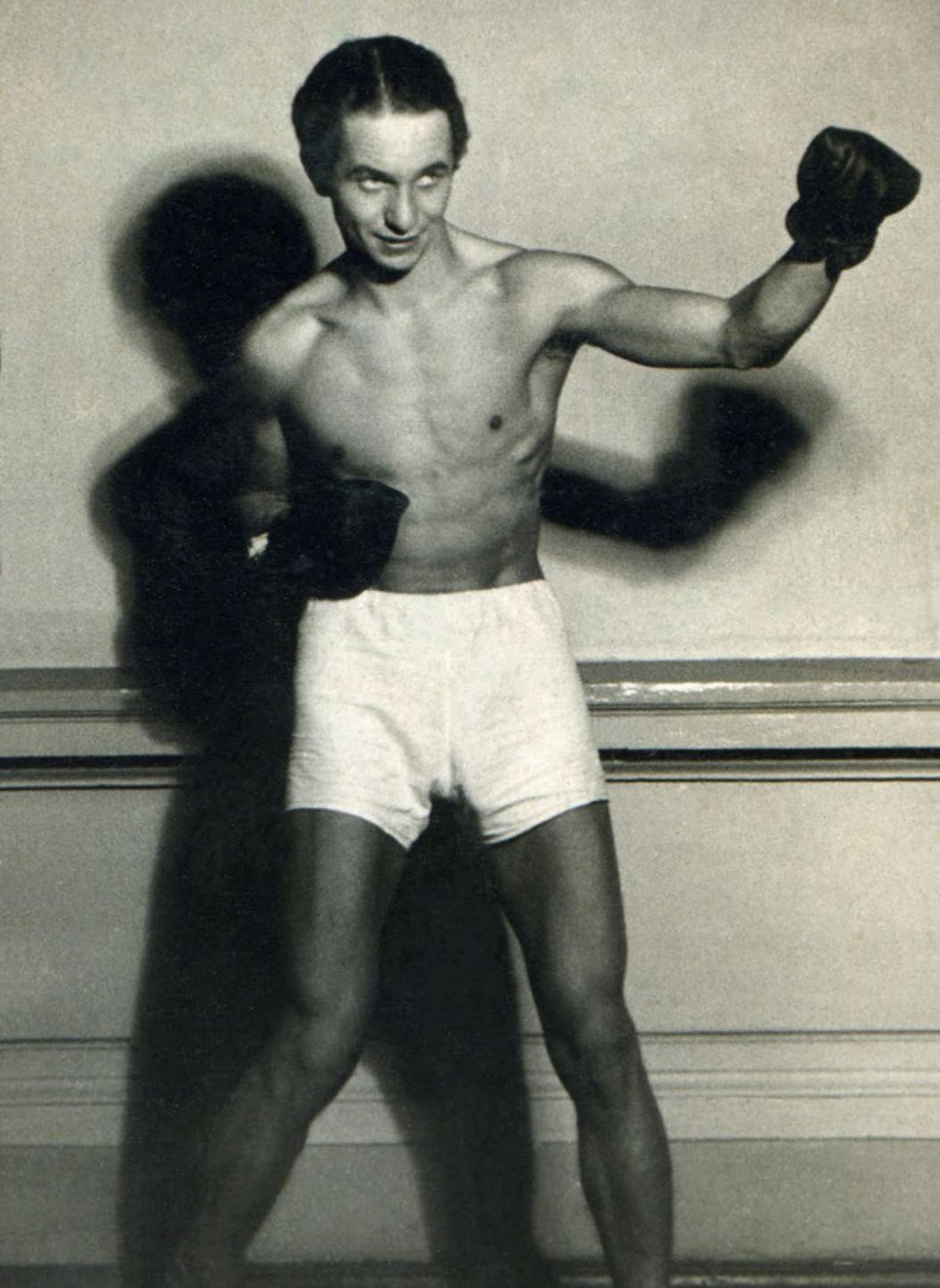
In almost all concentration camps, prisoners, with the consent and sometimes even with the approval of the SS authorities, practiced sports in their spare time. The condition for such activity was appropriate physical condition. The most popular disciplines were boxing and football. In KL Auschwitz, in order to enforce absolute obedience, the prisoners were forced by the SS authorities and German prisoners to perform exhausting exercises combined with learning to drill, known as “sport” (pseudo-sport). Combined with the ubiquitous hunger and brutal harassment, the prisoners quickly became “Muslims” - extremely exhausted, dehumanized numbers in their striped uniforms. There was no permission to practice qualified sports, but the prisoners also did not have the strength to undertake any additional physical activity.

From the first weeks of their stay in the camp, German functionary prisoners (kapos, block prisoners) fought boxing and wrestling duels with each other and played football for their own enjoyment and entertainment. In order to make the fights more attractive, they looked for rivals among prisoners-athletes. In KL Auschwitz, the first Polish-German boxing fight was fought in 1941 by Tadeusz “Teddy” Pietrzykowski, and over time the camp became an arena for many fights and matches.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE ROLE OF SPORT IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Each duel reminded that although Poland does not formally exist, the Poles are still alive, they have - even in the camp - their representatives who are defeating the Germans, so Poland has not died. The matches and duels were a reminder of the free world and gave hope for a return to it, giving moments of forgetfulness about the cruel reality of the camp. The Polish-German duel won was perceived as a harbinger of the victory of the war, strengthening the morale of the prisoners and giving them hope. For prisoners-athletes, sport also increased the chances of survival. Rewards in the form of an additional portion of food or the choice of a better commando often saved lives, as in the case of Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, who wrote in a secret message to his mother: 'Today I am an all-weight world champion of KL Auschwitz. (...) I'll be fine even in hell ...'.





TADEUSZ „TEDDY” PIETRZYKOWSKI (1917 – 1991)

Born in 1917 in Warsaw, brought up in a traditional Polish family, in which patriotism and Catholic values played a great role, adamant in the realization of his sports dreams and life decisions, Tadeusz Pietrzykowski is a model for generations.

At the age of 11, he joined the scouting movement, which, as he recalled: *it was first and foremost my first and most important school of life. (...) I had my first contact with gloves at a gathering. I caught the boxing bug and this skill of boxing, which I encountered in scouting, deepened in the WKS Legia sports club, exerting a decisive influence on my life.* Until 1939, representing Legia, fighting under the pseudonym “Teddy”, taken from Teddy Yarosz - his boxing idol, he won the championship of Warsaw several times and the vice-championship of Eastern Poland in the bantamweight.

The outbreak of World War II interrupted a very promising boxing career. Tadeusz Pietrzykowski took part in the defense of Warsaw, then he wanted to fight for a free Poland in Polish military units forming in France. Caught during the illegal crossing of borders, he was deported in the first transport of Polish political prisoners to KL Auschwitz, where on June 14, 1940 he was given the number 77. In March 1941, he was the first boxer to fight a victorious boxing duel with a German kapo.

TADEUSZ „TEDDY” PIETRZYKOWSKI (1917 – 1991)

Until 1943, he fought several dozen victorious fights in the camp, becoming informal, as he himself called it in a secret message to his mother, an all-weight champion of the KL Auschwitz. His victories in the camp ring raised the morale of his colleagues, a sense of pride in being a Pole, and gave them hope to survive until the final victory in the war. Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, as a recognizable and privileged prisoner, had the opportunity to help and help weaker colleagues, among other things, by sharing food that he received in return for fights. During his stay in KL Auschwitz, he stood up for the beaten Father Maksymilian Kolbe, who later became a saint. Acting in the camp resistance movement organized by Captain Witold Pilecki, he attempted to assassinate commandant Rudolf Höss. In 1943 he was deported to KL Nauengamme, where he also fought many boxing fights. Evacuated to KL Bergen-Belsen and liberated there in 1945, he joined the ranks of General Maczek's 1st Armored Division, continuing to fight in the boxing ring. As he recalled: *The return to Poland in 1947, then studies at the Academy of Physical Education and work in education. I chose school sports in order to pay off the debt to my role models: professors and educators, continuing their educational efforts for the good of the young generation.* He raised generations of young people, remembered as a wonderful educator and friend. Many of them visit the grave of Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, who died in Bielsko-Biała in 1991, testifying to his multi-generational bond and respect for his life attitude.





INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR AND SCREENWRITER MACIEJ BARCZEWSKI

What made you interested in the story of Tadeusz “Teddy” Pietrzykowski, a boxer from KL Auschwitz, and why did you decide to write a script about him?

Tadeusz Borowski, a famous war-time Polish writer, wrote in one of his stories: “There is still the memory of the number 77, who used to box the Germans as he wanted, taking revenge in the ring for what others got in the field”. This sentence intrigued me so much that I began to investigate the fate of the prisoners of the first transport to the Auschwitz camp, especially Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, marked with number 77. I was fascinated by the fact that for his fellow inmates he was a symbol of hope for victory over Nazi terror. At the same time, it turned out that today he is a relatively unknown, although due to the place and circumstances in which he had to fight, his duels became almost mythical. For his contemporaries, he was a superhero.

The film opens with information that it is inspired by real events. How much truth is there and how much fiction?

Most of the events shown in ‘The Champion’ actually happened. However, as in the case of other fact-based films, the need to maintain a clear narrative and emotional tension imposed the necessity to introduce changes, whether in terms of the chronology of events, locations or characters with whom the main character comes into contact. Due to the rules of the art of film drama, introducing such changes was necessary, but I wanted to preserve the historical texture of the events, as well as to reveal the truth about the essence of the main character.

Was the fact that you are the author of the script helpful in the work on the set?

Of course, the communication between the director and the scriptwriter ran relatively smoothly and almost without conflicts (*laughs*). The amount of information about the Auschwitz camp and Tadeusz Pietrzykowski gathered during the almost three years of preparation for the shooting has often proved to be useful in cooperation with all production divisions.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR AND SCREENWRITER - MACIEJ BARCZEWSKI

What decided about the choice of Piotr Głowacki for the lead role?

When I started working on the script for “The Champion”, some people suggested that the main role should be played by an athletic young actor with a bully appearance. Meanwhile, Teddy’s strength lay not in his muscles, but in his masterful technique and fortitude. I knew that in order to create a convincing character of Teddy I was going to need an actor who, at first glance, would be the opposite of the boxer archetype. Someone who looks inconspicuous, even harmless, but in whose eyes you can see two clenched fists. At the same time, it should be an actor who, for the role of an Auschwitz prisoner, is willing to undergo a radical transformation of his body, but also to master the boxing technique to the extent that allows fighting without cuts and without the participation of a double. I am convinced that for years there has not been a role in Polish cinema that would require such a far-reaching physical and workshop commitment from an actor. Piotr was my first and only choice and he more than met these expectations.

You can also see other great Polish actors in the film, including Grzegorz Matecki, Marcin Bosak, Marian Dziędziel, Piotr Witkowski and Rafał Zawierucha. What

was your way of getting the best out of them on set?

There was no magic recipe here. I realized that with such a demanding project, a very tight schedule of shooting, with German-speaking roles played by Polish-speaking actors, the key to success would be intense and long-lasting rehearsals. We spent the entire summer of 2019 rehearsing and polishing the nuances of the characters. Entering the set, the actors basically once again performed what we had developed earlier, modifying the details of their performances to a specific location or scenography.

Is Tadeusz “Teddy” Pietrzykowski a hero that the contemporary viewer can identify with?

Definitely. Pietrzykowski, like the biblical David, fought Goliath in the camp arena, just as each of us struggles with adversities every day. The fact that he fought his fights under the most difficult conditions, in the worst time and place in the world, and continued to win despite everything, gives each of us hope that there is no such obstacle that ultimately cannot be overcome. It can be said that we are all warriors in the ring of our lives. On the other hand, the screen character of Pietrzykowski reminds that even if all hope is fading, even in the worst circumstances one should not lose it and stop fighting.

What were the biggest challenges on the set of “The Champion”?

The weather. A dozen or so days before the shooting, a storm passed over Poland and destroyed our camp scenography. In this situation, we had to reconstruct what we could and “add” the rest in post-production using digital effects. Fortunately, despite a modest budget, thanks to hard work and commitment of VFX specialists, the marriage of real sets with VFX elements was successful.

Why do you think this movie is worth watching?

From the beginning of my work on “The Champion”, I wanted to provide emotions that were often lacking in cinema referring to the subject of war or sports. We tried to create a film story, which, thanks to the level of execution and its universal message, would be able to compete with international features.

Most of all, however, “The Champion” is worth seeing because it is a movie that combines a story about an extraordinary man with a contemplation on the meaning of hope in extreme situations. And the price we sometimes have to pay for hope.





INTERVIEW WITH LEAD ACTOR - Piotr Głowacki

What were the preparations for the role of the legendary KL Auschwitz boxer Tadeusz “Teddy” Pietrzykowski?

Every time I work on a character, what interests me is the profession, the skills that the character has. They are the key to his body, movement and psyche. Here such a distance was significant. We are dealing with a boxing champion, a man who fought in a bantamweight before the war. From the very beginning, I saw a long way to go, especially since I had never practiced any martial arts before. I had a lot to show off, but also work to be able to represent him on the screen. During several months of preparation, for the purposes of the role I lost 16 kg, which is 20% of my body weight. It was the result of a proper diet and intense physical activity under the supervision of trainers. I was offered the role in “The Champion” in 2018. We set up a preparation plan very quickly. I started my first strength exercises in July 2018, and boxing training in September of the same year. I worked with two coaches, Konrad Ostrowski and Michał Pluskota, who made sure that we were going in the right direction, and this was the direction of Tadeusz Pietrzykowski’s photos from before the war. Due to the fact that I had to be in the training room several times a week, I had time to make friends with the character, feel his effort, sports path, fascination

and passion for boxing. At the same time, I was also studying Teddy’s story. During the preparations, I visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. Thanks to the very friendly attitude of the museum staff, I spent several days there, having access to all places, archives, warehouses and, above all, to the enormous knowledge of the people working there. I had a chance to live for a few days in this place, which was the prison of Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, but also the place where, paradoxically, he achieved his greatest boxing success. At the end of the preparations, I managed to establish contact with one of the oldest Polish active trainers - Mr. Marian Basiak. It was important, because he himself, like Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, was a student of the legendary Feliks Stamm. We also wanted to show what pre-war boxing looked like. During several months of preparation, I was able to stay in places where both amateurs and professionals train. I talked to them, we met during the exercises. The issue of training is not just a matter of building your body, it is also networking, meetings where you hear stories, meet people, watch boxers during training. During the preparation for the role, you train in the gyms, both with people for whom it is a hobby, a way of life, and also with those who are true masters. You then see this distance between the amateur and the professional athlete. At the same time, you are

INTERVIEW WITH LEAD ACTOR - Piotr Głowacki

preparing to become a boxing champion, so you can see that even in a year of training, you will not achieve such a high level. So your job is not only to learn authentically what you need for the role, but also to learn how to present it to create an impression of championship on the screen. In the training room, under the guise of observing exercises, you also see the way of being, behavior, psyche, habits.

How do you remember working on the set?

What I remember above all is the enormous commitment of all people working on this production. The film paradox is that when we touch scary or painful topics, we also do it out of our passion for cinema. It is beautiful that “The Champion” is about not only the evil that hit the world at that time, but that we made a film about a passion that allows you to oppose this evil. It was possible thanks to the passion of the entire team. These moments when everyone was focused on a specific goal and managed to achieve it are the most beautiful and probably the most memorable moments of this work. For the first time on the set of this film, I had the opportunity to work with the director Maciej Barczewski. Thanks to this, it was an adventure with elements of getting to know and trying to get along and it was a really interesting experience. I remember when I started reading the script I had very

strong naturalistic associations at first. It is thanks to Maciej that we have reached such a degree of formal meditation that raises this topic to the level of the main character’s passion. Everything was done in harmony and based on calm dialogue. Maciej was very open to any suggestions and ideas from each member of the team. As for the actors, I have worked with most of them before. It is interesting in this profession that we meet on the set in different configurations. For example, we have already appeared in a war movie with Marcin Bosak (who played the role of Lagerführer). We met for the first time 15 years ago on the production set of the Warsaw Uprising.

What made you not use the stunt-double on the set?

At a certain stage of the preparations, Maciej Maciejewski - the stunt coordinator, told me that he has such kind of support for me. However, we agreed that it would not be needed. We went through this movie scene by scene knowing what my fitness needs would be, what the demand for my movement would be. I really wanted to be able to be at any moment with my character. In a film where body and physicality are the essence of his fight for life, every moment of his presence on the screen is a story about this character.

Why do you think this movie is worth watching?

While working on ‘The Champion’, we thought about someone who, thanks to a strong will to survive and his passion, could overcome the greatest, unimaginable evil. I think that this is a picture which, by showing closely the individual fate of Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, can give hope that if we strongly believe in something, if we work hard for something, we are able to overcome all adversities, including our fears and anxieties. I treat the title of the movie “The Champion” as a word that has many different definitions and interpretations. The entire film is an attempt to answer the question: What does it really mean to be a champion? We are bidding farewell to the last people who experienced Second World War personally. Hence this story has a mythical / mythological element, especially for the young audience. We show this story to give people confidence in themselves and in what they do. Thanks to this, everything is possible.



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