

The Ulma family from Markowa

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The Righteous as a model of humanity

Interview with Mateusz Szpytma, PhD, deputy president of the IPN, initiator and first head of the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews during World War II, and honorary member of the Polish Society of the Righteous Among the Nations, published in 2017 in the "IPN Bulletin".

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We are talking on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Council to Aid Jews "Żegota". How do you assess Poland's attitude towards the Holocaust during the war?

The Polish state behaved as it should, it fulfilled its obligations, it fought and it did not capitulate. Not for a second during the war did it participate in the crimes of totalitarianism. We made no treaty with the Germans, there was no transfer of power, etc. From the first to the last day of the war, Poland was always on the right side, which also had consequences in the relationship between ethnic Poles and those of Jewish origin. There was no

governmental, institutional collaboration with the German occupier. On the other hand, different attitudes are revealed in every society during the war. There are heroes and traitors, and people overwhelmed by reality who stand by, whether they sympathise or not. Similarly, we have seen a whole range of behaviours in the Polish society. I am often asked whether there was much or little help for the Jews. Looking at how much there was to do, how many people in need there were, it is fair to say that there was not enough. On the other hand, observing the situation of the Poles, given that they faced the death penalty (and we know that in Western Europe the German occupation was less harsh, and, for example, there were only financial penalties for rescuing Jews) - the number of people rescuing Jews can be considered significant.

Maybe there was no institutional collaboration because the Germans were not interested in it?

In 1939 Poland could have requested capitulation negotiations instead of fighting to the end. As France did in 1940. This would mean accepting the Germans' terms. This would have been convenient for them for various reasons, including propaganda. But this was not an option, because Poland was not going to capitulate. And it did not intend to collaborate with the Germans. The fact that the Germans did not create a competing "pseudo government" was due to various reasons. But the fact is that they did not have the support here that, for example, Vidkun Quisling gave them in Norway. They also took that into account. They probed various people, such as former three-time Prime Minister of the Second Republic Wincenty Witos. But to no effect.

The Register of Facts of Repression against Polish Citizens for Helping the Jewish Population during World War II, available in the IPN digital library, also mentions other punishments applied in occupied Poland.

The occupier's decrees most often threatened with death. Less frequently, they provided for other forms of repression, such as imprisonment. The Germans, however, being masters of the life and death of Poles and Jews, did what they liked. They could murder people for the presumption of help, or they could just as easily punish them with beatings or robbery of property (in the case of women, rape) for actually supporting a ghetto refugee. This often depended on the imagination of the

local German official or gendarme administering the punishment. Let us remember that the German decrees were not intended to “respect the law”, but above all to explain their own brutalities. It was the victims who were to be bound by their content, not the perpetrators. Even feeding or buying anything from Jews was illegal and punishable by death by the Germans. How is someone supposed to prove today that he is a Righteous Among the Nations because he carried food out into the field? Many acts of help were and remained anonymous. And they did not all involve hiding people at home. If a Jew escaped from the ghetto and survived for several months with the help of anonymous people in an area that was foreign to him, and in the end was shot by the Germans - we will never know about these people. If he was helped by a few or a dozen people during this time - they will remain anonymous.

The Germans began the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto in July 1942. “Żegota” was established in December. Wasn't that a bit late?

But Poles provided help earlier. This was done by individual people, sometimes by underground political circles (especially left-wing ones). Material support was provided to Jews, for example, by the municipal Department of Social Welfare in Warsaw. Let us also remember that from February 1942 there was a Jewish Department at the Union of Armed Struggle and then the Home Army, which not only informed the Government in Exile (and, through it, world opinion) of the fate of Polish Jews, but also provided support to the later Jewish Combat Organisation and the Jewish National Committee.

Is it possible to establish the number of Poles who rescued Jews and those who paid the highest price for this help?

According to the research led at the IPN by Aleksandra Namysło, PhD, and Prof Grzegorz Berendt, now deputy director of the Second World War Museum, there are several hundred people identified by name. The researchers also collected cases documented in German sources, including in the *Register* only those where the explicit reason for the conviction was aid provided to Jews. Fr Paweł Rytel-Andrianik and Artur Rytel-Andrianik and their team identified 1,059 people murdered for helping Jews. Their names are placed in the sanctuary of

the Blessed Virgin Mary Star of the New Evangelisation and St John Paul II in Toruń. The answer to the question of how many Poles saved Jews is much more difficult. Firstly, it depends very much on how we define "aid". No one has carried out a thorough study on this subject, so the figures given in the literature are estimates. Jan Żaryn says that there could have been up to a million such people, while Marcin Urynowicz, PhD, estimates that there were up to 300,000. For various reasons, far fewer people can be named; the aforementioned Prof. Grzegorz Berendt has so far identified around 10,000.

Church institutions and religious orders also provided help to Jews.

Many congregations, particularly female congregations, opened themselves up to help. Irena Sendlerowa, head of the children's department of "Żegota", had a lot of support from them. There was a sense that lives had to be saved, regardless of religion or nationality. It is worth noting that the Church was heavily repressed at the time. It is difficult to find another social group that was as repressed as priests.

When did people start talking about the Righteous during the period of "people's Poland"?

For several years after the war, much was said about the martyrdom of the Jewish people. Later, however, the communist authorities suddenly extinguished the subject. Among the small number of texts, the most serious work from the communist years is the book by Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej [This one is from my Homeland. Poles Helping Jews 1939-1945]* (First edition 1966, reissued several times). It remains a valuable source to this day. The authors have done a great thing by collecting information that may have been unavailable in later years. Then, for many years, there was no will on the part of the authorities to deal with this subject. From 1963, when Yad Vashem medals for the Righteous began to be awarded, Poles also received them, but it was not particularly publicised. The Communists allowed the Jewish theme to return to a greater extent in the second half of the 1980s. More attention to the heroism and achievements of the Righteous began to be drawn in Poland in the 21st century, or rather in the last ten years. It all started with Irena Sendlerowa...

... who was commemorated by the Polish parliament in 2018. How does the Institute of National Remembrance plan to get involved in the celebrations?

Our focus will be on a completely new exhibition about the Council to Aid Jews "Żegota", which we want to show in Poland and abroad in the year of Irena Sendlerowa. Also this year, a conference will be held showing the attitude of the nations occupied by the Germans towards the Holocaust.

You come from Markowa. When did you first hear about the story of the Ulmas and the terrible price they paid for saving the Jews?

When I was a child, I saw photos of people I didn't know in the family album. My parents explained to me that they were photos of the Ulma family, murdered by the Germans (Wiktoria Ulma was my grandmother's sister and my dad's godmother). When I started working at the IPN in 2000, I realised that outside of Markowa this crime was basically unknown. In spring 2003, I encouraged the local authorities to erect a monument. Abraham Segal, one of the Jews rescued by the people of Markowa, attended the unveiling ceremony in 2004. The topic aroused interest not only in the Polish media. Tours from Israel began to arrive in Markowa - approximately 5,000 people per year. So there was an idea to tell them more about the story of the Ulma family who were hiding Jews. Together with Bogdan Romaniuk, the then president of Stowarzyszenie Szczęśliwy Dom im. Rodziny Ulmów [the Ulma Family Happy Home Association], we convinced the authorities of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship to build the Museum. Building on the rich heritage of the IPN branches in Rzeszów and Krakow, a permanent exhibition was created devoted not only to the Ulmas, but also to other Poles who saved Jews.

The museum has an interesting architectural design.

I was an expert on the competition committee set up by the Łańcut Castle Museum, which was carrying out the investment, and I am delighted to have played a part in the selection of this extremely brave project. It is not only the exhibition that speaks here, but also the architecture itself. It is a memorial museum that leaves no one indifferent. It is not just another small museum.

The Museum in Markowa houses a reconstruction of the

Ulmas house.

Through its unusual reconstruction, we wanted to show the space in which sixteen people had to live for almost a year and a half. We placed the surviving household equipment they used, as well as personal documents and photographs.

The latest success of the Markowa Museum is the decision of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage to establish its branch in New York.

That is wonderful news. The establishment of such an institution in the "capital of the world" could be a breakthrough in the struggle to show Poland's contribution to the victory over German Nazism abroad. It provides an opportunity to portray the reality of the German occupation. Especially overseas, the picture of Poland during World War II is very distorted. We can change this by showing "Żegota", Irena Sendlerowa, Jan Karski, Witold Pilecki and those who, like the Ulmas, gave their own lives to save Jews.

What projects has the IPN carried out jointly with the Museum?

Perhaps the biggest was the nationwide action "Stones of Remembrance", organised by the IPN Branch in Rzeszów, during which students presented profiles of people who saved Jews in various regions of Poland. A training course for teachers was recently held by the Museum together with our staff from the Krakow branch.

The Podkarpacie region is surveyed in terms of the Righteous, but what about other regions?

Unfortunately, other regions of Poland have not been covered by such comprehensive works as those written by Prof. Elżbieta Rączy from the Rzeszów branch of the IPN. This is a task requiring long-term and tedious source work. Additionally, in recent years there has been a lot of pressure on researchers who conduct studies on aid for Jews. They are often negatively labelled. They are sometimes told that they are trying to create an alibi to protect Poles from accusations of alleged co-responsibility for the Holocaust. And yet what is at stake is the truth, the reliability of scientific research showing all aspects of the situation resulting from the criminal decisions of the German state. Without the huge official,

military and legal machine, known as the German Reich, there would have been no Holocaust on Polish soil. It was the Reich that carried out the genocide of the Jews. It was the Reich that protected and rewarded everyone who cooperated with the Germans in this regard. German state responsibility for the Holocaust cannot be diluted. Even when talking about individuals or groups of individuals of other nationalities who took part in the crime, one cannot overlook the state and legal protection the criminals received from the Reich. Otherwise, we would be building false reference points for a false assessment. Paradoxically, they lead to the removal of responsibility from the state and the society that elected Adolf Hitler as its leader. To whitewash the role of millions of soldiers, officers and activists who acted under the symbol of the swastika. The failure to take into account the role of the German state leads to absurd questions such as: if the crimes of the Holocaust were committed by everyone, why are we picking on the Germans? The Holocaust is the criminal work of the German Reich. If any Polish citizen went to serve it - they were committing an act of treason against the Republic of Poland.

What research is being carried out by the IPN on the rescue of Jews?

There is a central research programme on Polish-Jewish relations. I would like to see a study on Polish-Jewish and Jewish-Polish relations in the various regions during the German occupation, including the aid provided to Jews in a comprehensive manner. This is not easy due to the limited number of staff involved. But even this does not explain why we know so little about saving Jews, e.g. in the Lublin region. However, we are trying to change this.

Irena Sendlerowa's Children, In Darkness, The Righteous, The Story of the Kowalski Family and most recently *Asylum*, filmed outside Poland, are examples of films dedicated to the Righteous. How do you assess the presence of this theme in Polish and world cinematography?

I believe that there is still a lack of a full-length feature film that would appeal to the world public with its content and high artistic values.

On the initiative of the President, the 17 March will be National Day of Remembrance for Poles Saving Jews.

This is very important. This will mobilise state institutions and various circles to remember those who risked their lives and those of their loved ones to come to the aid of persecuted Jews. It will also remind us of the sacrifice of those who died for such help. The lives of those murdered by the Germans will not be restored. However, we can save their sacrifice from oblivion. It is the duty of the state to portray heroes as role models. And we are fulfilling this duty.

Interview by Maciej Foks

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