

The Ulma family from Markowa

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Crime and memory

An interview with Mateusz Szpytma, PhD, Deputy President of the Institute of National Remembrance, about the documentary on the Ulma family “Historia jednej zbrodni” [“The Story of One Crime”].

A new documentary on the Ulma family, “The Story of One Crime”, directed by Mariusz Pilis, has been released. This is not the first film on this subject. How does it differ from previous ones?

- That's true, several documentaries have already been released about the Ulmas - their life and death. First there was a report by Beata Bartman of TVP Rzeszów. The first director to take an interest in the subject was Dariusz Walusiak. In 2004 he made a film entitled “Ulmowie. Świadek Sprawiedliwych” [“The Ulmas. Testimony of the Righteous”]. The fate of the Ulma family was not yet widely known at the time. Fr Andrzej Baczynski's productions “Cena Życia” [“The Price of Life”] from 2004 and Rafał Wieczyński's “Świat Józefa” [“Józef's World”] from 2009 played an important role. All told the life story of the Ulmas and the Goldmans, Gruenfelds and Didners they were hiding. More importantly: they also showed the successful rescue of Jews by other villagers. This is unique material, because almost all of the witnesses appearing in Walusiak's film, for example, are dead. However, Mariusz Pilis' film presents a completely new point of view. He uses the story of the Ulma family as a pretext to talk about the meanders of collective consciousness. And about the manipulations around the memory of German crimes. Also about how Germans perceive the past of their parents and grandparents.

Is that a problem?

Yes, very much so. The starting point in Pilis' film is the story of a certain letter from the time when the Castle Museum in Łańcut, on behalf of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship, was involved in the construction of the Museum in Markowa. We were looking for information about the fate of Eilert Dieken - the head of the German gendarmerie that murdered the Ulma family, the Jews they were hiding and committed many other crimes. In 2011, I found a reference on the Internet that in 1953 Dieken was involved in a tender for the renovation of a police station in the West German town of Esens. I prepared a letter to the Archives in this town asking for information about him. We did not write about the crime, we only noted that due to the construction, we needed information and photos of Dieken for the museum exhibition. In response, a few months later, we received some post-war photographs in which Dieken appeared as a police officer. Information about our search also reached Dieken's daughter, who sent us an ID photo of her father from the war years - in the uniform of a gendarmerie officer. She expressed her delight that her father's image would be on display at the museum.

Why is that surprising?

The content of the letter was shocking to us. Dieken's daughter - in absolute good faith - wrote that her father, as a gendarme in Łańcut, had "done a lot of good for people". And added that "she wouldn't expect anything else from him."

The family of the criminal talks about his merits...

Yes. So we went to see Mrs Wilbers. She lived in complete misconception about these events. Her father told her that he couldn't talk about what happened during the war because it was an "official secret". But he somehow managed to hint that he allegedly helped people.

Perhaps this is a unique story. After all, the Germans must know that millions of people in the East were murdered by specific perpetrators.

Very often they have it in their heads that the problem exists but it "does not concern" their families. Even if Germans have family portraits in their albums with their

grandfather or father in a uniform from the war, and even if they know that there were some Wehrmacht or SS crimes (and they generally only hear about crimes against Jews), they believe that they were committed by someone else. Someone else. Some criminals, some Nazis. Their grandparents were all right. They stood guard, worked in the kitchen, peeled potatoes... It seems that the Wehrmacht during the war was the world's largest army of potato peelers and idle guards...

Is it easy for them to accept the knowledge of how things really were?

That's the point - not really. Despite official statements by politicians, in reality all this is treated - how to put it mildly - as a not particularly desirable topic. Pilis also mentions, as if on the sidelines of this story, the case of the Warsaw Rising executioner Reinefahrt. After the war, he also lived as a respected local government official, a mayor... And the existence of a plaque reminding who he really was during the war does not inspire enthusiasm.

In 2022, Mariusz Pilis spoke to the mayor of Esens, where Dieken was a police officer after the war. He also had no idea about anything. However, at least he has the will to face the problem of erasing this shameful memory.

This film was made ten years ago...

Yes. That's why - thanks to Pilis' great sensitivity - a truly remarkable story came out of it. I was surprised myself when I saw photos from a decade ago. Another thing is that the director's journalistic hand also recorded our ordinary conversations. And that can be a problem. In normal discussions we operate with mental shortcuts. I myself have trouble with the scene in which we talk to historians Bogdan Musiał and Maciej Korkut about my research into this crime. I say at one point that I am the closest relative of the Ulmas. Of course, I meant that I am one of the closest - and that is what I should have said. But we talked for hours then, about the thousand different contexts of the case. The fact is that I am the grandson of the sister of the murdered Wiktoria Ulma (who was also my dad's godmother). But it would be more precise to point out that somewhat closer relatives are alive. And they are from my parents' generation. For example, Zbigniew and Jerzy Ulma from Markowa are nephews of Józef and Wiktoria. I tried to

cut this fragment from the film, as it did not precisely reflect our family connections. But for technical reasons this was not possible. Anyway, the whole story is about my family hence the experience of that crime and showing these different contexts was and is a big experience for me.

And since you have visited Dieken's daughter you must have told her all this.

Well, that was not an easy problem either. This woman wrote a letter in good faith. She sent a photograph of her father in the uniform of the German gendarmerie. She also appears as a victim of these manipulations. After all, she can hardly be blamed for her father telling lies or half-truths - while falsifying facts, leaving aside the horror he co-created. We wanted to talk to her while respecting the fact that she helped us in our search. And that she agreed to the recording. She herself was surprised as to why we were so interested in her father... So, we weren't going to shock her with what we knew, but we couldn't hide anything either. We said we knew a different picture of events. We prepared a sealed envelope for her and her family with documents translated into German about this crime. We left it to her and Dieken's grandchildren to decide whether they wanted to know the truth and open the envelope. We don't know what they did. We also offered to meet in the future. Today Mrs Wilbers is dead. But it certainly wasn't an easy story for her either.

There is still the problem of false accusations against the residents of Markowa in the film.

That's another issue. There is a scene in which Jan Grabowski, who is famous for his harsh assessments not necessarily backed up by reliable scientific research, tells us that after the murder of the Ulmas, the residents of Markowa murdered all the Jews hidden in the village. This is one of those statements that fits the image he creates. Also in this case he didn't see anything wrong about slandering the residents who were genuinely dedicated to helping the persecuted. Not only was there no such massacre, but as many as 21 Jews survived in Markowa, hidden with dedication and heroic courage until the end of the German occupation. Pilis also shows direct recordings of meetings with those who survived in Markowa thanks to the support of entire families risking death.

The world likes to be deceived

Well. That is painful. However, let us remember that without struggling to find the truth about those times, we will always be doomed to falsehoods and manipulations. Today in Ukraine, we see how a hypocritical narrative about history is becoming the starting point for new crimes.

The interview was published in July 2023.

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