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Hands off our heroes! - a text by President of the IPN Dr. Łukasz Kamiński in "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung"

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Finger weg von unseren Helden

Woher wollen die Deutschen wissen, was typisch polnisch ist? Wir wissen nur, was unter deutscher Besatzung typisch war bei uns.

Von Łukasz Kamiński

WARSCHAU, im April

Unbe-Hagen

How do Germans want to know what is typically Polish? We only know what was typical during the German occupation in Poland.

Last month I attended the moving ceremony of opening a new museum in Markowa, located in southern Poland. It is dedicated to the Poles who saved Jews during the German occupation. The Ulma family is the Museum's patron. They were murdered, together with the Jews they were hiding, in March 1944 by German gendarmes.

The opening of the museum had extensive coverage and was attended by representatives of the highest state authorities. Along with the Polish President, Ambassador of Israel took the floor, one could listen to the recorded message by one of the Jewish survivors from Markowa. Most Poles heard for the first time about the story of Józef and Wiktoria Ulma and their children: Stasia, Basia, Władysław, Franek, Antek, Marysia, and the seventh child, whose delivery started during the execution. The oldest child was eight years old. For the first time one could hear the names of the rescued: Saul Goldman and his four sons (called Szallami), Golda Grünfeld, her sister Lea Didner and her small daughter.

Heroism of the Ulma family was emphasized in dozens of comments, referring to values such as love of your neighbour and sacrifice. One could hear about the importance of truth and the learning lesson of the Holocaust for the future generations. It was emphasised that in the Ulma's copy of the Bible the parable about the Good Samaritan was underlined and the words of Jesus Christ were quoted: „ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends”.

Meanwhile, the reader of the article by Joseph Croitoru („Was the heroic Ulma family typical?”, FAZ, April 6, 2016.) could get the impression that the ceremony was a political party event of the new Polish government, which „stirred up a historical debate”. Contrary to the assertions of the author the completion of the museum was not the result of the last elections, but the decision of the Minister of Culture in the previous government, who granted the initiative its financial and

organizational support. I followed closely the press and Internet comments but I did not notice any „stirr-up” of the long-lasting debate on Polish-Jewish relations during the war. There are many issues that antagonize contemporary Poles, but the need to commemorate the heroes who saved Jews is certainly not one of them.

The question raised in the title of the article by Croitoru can be considered either as absurd or as rethorical. It is obvious that the attitude of the Ulmas, losing their lives to save Jews, was not a typical one. Heroic attitudes are never typical! Similarly, the activity of Irena Sendler, who saved two and a half thousand Jewish children from the hands of the German murderers by placing them mainly in Polish families and Catholic monasteries, was not typical. The fate of a courier of the Polish underground authorities, Jan Karski, who informed, among others, President Roosevelt about the tragedy of the Polish Jews in 1943, unfortunately without causing any real reaction, was not a typical one.

The attitude of the Ulma family as well as thousands like them, was not typical, just as the attitude of those who blackmailed and denounced Jews in hiding or the Poles who were helping them to the Germans, cannot be regarded as typical. In 1943 the Polish Underground State introduced the death penalty for such acts. A sentence of death penalty was issued by the Polish underground against the police officer who denounced the Ulma family.

The museum in Markowa was not created in order to suggest that the attitude of the Ulma family was typical. On the contrary - it depicts the uniqueness of their sacrifice. It was created in order to place the Ulma family and others like them as a guiding light for present and future generations. I am convinced that the museum's visitors, regardless of their nationality, will ask themselves questions about human nature, about the nature of good and evil.

In the German-occupied Poland other attitudes were typical. Already in the first weeks of occupation what became typical were mass executions, mainly of representatives of the Polish elite. In February of 1940 Hans Frank, the Governor-General, said in an interview for a German newspaper: „In Prague, for example, there were big red posters with the information that on a certain day, 7 Czechs were executed. I said to myself: If I wanted to spend one poster for every seven Poles shot, then all Polish forests together would not suffice to produce enough paper”.

In the areas incorporated into the Third Reich the expulsions of the Polish population, which included more than 800,000 people, were typical. Roundups on the streets, with the detainees being sent to prisons, concentration camps or, in the best-case scenario, to forced labour, were typical. Pacifications of villages, during which buildings were burned and people were murdered, were typical. In the Zamość area not only the displacement of Poles was typical, it was also typical to take their children away in order to germanize them. Destruction of the entire education system, robbery and devastation of works of art,

economic exploitation of the country was typical. Finally, punishment for helping Jews, at whom the Nazis targeted the total Holocaust, choosing the Polish territory for the place of their „final solution", was also typical. According to the regulations of the occupation authorities it was liable to death penalty.

All these phenomena were typical, as implemented in accordance with the guidelines of Hitler. Even before the attack on Poland, during a meeting at Obersalzberg, he told the generals that the purpose of the invasion „is not to achieve a particular line", but „the physical destruction of the enemy" and he warned them: „I prepared the troops Totenkopf, so far only in the East, and I ordered them to kill without mercy i pardon men, women i children of Polish descent i Polish speech. Only in this way we shall get the living space that we need".

The fact that the Poles were victims of the German (and Soviet) occupation is a historical fact. One does not need to conduct any special research to „cement the role of Poles as victims," as it was suggested by a historian quoted in the article. The martyrdom of Poles does not diminish the Holocaust and the suffering of the Jews.

The Institute of National Remembrance, as well as many other institutions in Poland, conducts research on the fate of the Poles who saved Jews, not to meet any ideological demands. We believe that it is our fundamental duty to the heroes risking their own lives that their names are printed in the memory of posterity.

The Poles are proud of their history, of the fact that we were the first to

oppose Hitler i we fought the Germans to the last day of the war, incurring huge losses. We remember that we are the only ones in Europe who created an underground state. It was not only military structures, but also civil administration, including the Council to Aid Jews ("Zegota").

This does not mean that there is no debate about the difficult aspects of our history, mainly about Polish-Jewish relations. It has become possible only after the collapse of the Communist system. Unfortunately, more and more it is dominated by radicals, making it difficult for genuine dialogue. Meanwhile, the memory of the Poles who rescued Jews does not invalidate the cases of treason, and even crime, or vice versa - the memory of the shameful attitudes of some Poles will not erase the history of heroism of others. Equally true are statements that more Jews could have been saved, and those indicating that no one can be expected to risk the life of his family. This way of discussion does not bring us closer to understanding the past but it distances us from what is the most important in this debate - the fundamental questions of human attitudes in the most difficult time.

In Poland there is a dispute about how many Poles during the war were involved in helping Jews. It stems from the fact that no such statistics during the occupation were created, and then for many years the topic was not studied. Regardless of this discussion, one thing is certain. They were far more numerous than the members of the anti-Nazi resistance in Germany, whose stories are memorized in many museums and memorial sites. Polish heroes who were risking their

lives rescuing neighbors deserve commemoration. Instead of questioning the sense of building the museum dedicated to them, one should rather start wondering why it happened so late.

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