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<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/10783,What-makes-the-Ulma-family-special-an-article-by-the-Deputy-President-of-the-IPN.html>

17.05.2024, 13:22

08.09.2023

What makes the Ulma family special? - an article by the Deputy President of the IPN, Mateusz Szpytma Ph.D.

The Ulma family could become a symbol of international significance, just like Rotmistrz Witold Pilecki or Jan Karski. I sincerely hope that with time, the name 'Ulma' will appear not only in Polish but also in foreign history textbooks.



The Ulma family was unique. Józef Ulma and his wife Wiktoria were of

modest means and lived in the countryside. They were enlightened people with open minds. Józef was an extraordinary man, mostly self-educated – he had completed only four years of primary school and six months of an agricultural school, and yet could be considered a representative of the peasant intelligentsia. He was well-read, with a home library of at least three hundred items and magazine subscriptions. He was involved in various social initiatives at the local level, including cooperatives. In his youth, he participated in organizations associated with the Catholic Church and the Union of Rural Youth of the Republic of Poland called 'Wici.' Wiktoria Ulma, also without a higher education degree, completed seven years of primary school. However, she attended courses organised by the Folk High School in Gać and performed in the village theatre. The Ulmas were thus a couple of simple people, not well-educated, but exceedingly enlightened. This is also evidenced by the books and photographs they left behind. Józef Ulma was an exceptional photographer whose images are still of great value today. He captured the reality of the world around him in a way that was unusual for his time. In addition to weddings and funerals, he took pictures of his family's daily life: washing the dishes, cooking, hanging laundry, Wiktoria teaching their daughter to write or the children playing at the table. Nowadays, understandably, the Ulmas are mainly known for their help given to Jews during World War II.

Although not the sole example of their exceptional character, the Ulmas' actions during the Second World War were particularly remarkable. They decided to hide eight Jews in their home, for which

they were later bestially murdered by German occupiers. Based on documents from the independence underground, it is believed that Włodzimierz Leś, a Blue Police officer from Łańcut who had previously aided Jews that were hiding in the Ulma's house, was the one to inform the Germans about their activities. Unlike the Ulmas, Leś evicted the Jews and denounced them to the Germans after they requested the return of their property. He also took part in the execution as an assistant to the German gendarmerie.

The trial records of one of the perpetrators Joseph Kokott provide insight into the execution of the Ulma family and the Jews they protected during the German occupation despite the threat to their lives. The Ulmas gave shelter to eight Jews: Saul Goldman and his four sons, Baruch, Mechel, Joachim and Moses (called Shalls in Łańcut), Chaim Goldman's two daughters, Gołda Grünfeld and Lea (Layca) Didner, and Lea's daughter Reszla. According to the witness' statement, after the Blue Police officers surrounded the house, the Germans went inside and shot the Jews hiding in the attic on the spot. They then dragged the Ulmas outside and murdered Józef and Wiktoria, who was in advanced pregnancy. After some hesitation, the executioners decided to shoot the children as well. Six young kids, 8-year-old Stanisława, 6-year-old Barbara, 5-year-old Władysław, 4-year-old Franciszek, 3-year-old Antoni and 1,5-year-old Maria, all lost their lives. Seventeen people, including Józef and Wiktoria's unborn child, were murdered in a matter of moments.

In September 1944, Włodzimierz Leś was executed by order of the

Polish Underground State. The German commander of the assault Eilert Dieken went unpunished. Joseph Kokott, who declared himself German after the Third Reich seized the Czech Republic, was the only one of the perpetrators found after the war, in Czechoslovakia. He was extradited and given the death sentence, but it was later changed to life imprisonment. He died in a Polish prison in 1980.

Elevating the Ulma family to the altars is a consequence of their life, which was beautiful even before World War II. They were open and helpful to others, living a life filled with love, which eventually led them to help the persecuted Jews. The Ulmas were also religious, practising people, guided in their lives by the Decalogue and the Gospel. Their library contained *Dzieje biblijne starego i nowego przymierza* (Biblical Acts of the Old and New Covenant), which highlighted passages from the parable of the Good Samaritan and the commandment to love one's neighbour. From the account of Józef Ulma's brother, we know that these passages were most likely marked personally by Józef and Wiktoria. Their later deeds proved that they decided to turn an idea into action – they risked their lives and those of their loved ones to save people in need. Despite their tragic end, we must recognise that without people like the Ulmas, the lives of tens of thousands of Polish Jews would not have been saved. Some of the thousands of Poles who came to their aid, including the Ulamas, paid the ultimate price.

Let us not forget that saving Jews during the Nazi occupation of Poland was a brave act that carried immense danger. Starting on October 15, 1941, the Germans imposed the death penalty on both Jews who fled

the ghettos and Poles who helped them. In 1942, that law was further tightened and the threat of death was extended to those who knew of anyone hiding Jews but did not report it to the Germans. Significantly, the circumstances were tragic not only for the hunted and exterminated Jews but also for the Poles. Round-ups and arrests were a common occurrence during the occupation years. Any activity – not just political – that the Germans regarded as sabotage was punishable by deportation to labour deep in the Reich or to a concentration camp, or by execution. In a country forcibly subordinated to the war economy of the Third Reich, the financial situation of the citizens was dire, with many barely able to afford to feed themselves and their families. Under such conditions, helping those in an even worse situation was an act worthy of the greatest honour and respect.

Beatification is an important religious event for Catholics. And although from a Jewish perspective the awarding Ulmas the medal of Righteous Among the Nations in 1995 is most significant, their beatification can certainly contribute to spreading awareness of the Ulma family among Christians around the world. It is also an opportunity to remind everyone – not just Catholics – that the Ulmas were an extraordinary family, already recognised by the Jews who bestowed on them the highest secular state award in Israel, and now also honoured by the Catholic Church which elevated them to the altars. Furthermore, the beatification presents a chance to commemorate other Poles who rescued Jews throughout the Second World War. The Ulmas were not the only ones. Today they represent all those who risked their lives to save their fellow human beings from the Holocaust.

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Mateusz Szpytma Ph.D.

Deputy President of the IPN

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