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The story of the Ulmas' martyrdom should be known worldwide

As Poles, we are proud that on 10 September 2023, the Ulma family, our compatriots, will be added to the ranks of the Blessed of the Catholic Church. The significance of this event goes beyond the religious dimension – it will also be a tribute to heroes embodying the highest ideals of humanity.

A heavily worn, yellowed Bible opened to the parable of the merciful Samaritan, with a red line marking its title and a handwritten 'YES!' note on the side – this is the exhibit that comes to my mind whenever I think about the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II in the village of Markowa in southern Poland.

This copy of the Scriptures belonged to Józef and Wiktoria Ulma. They were Polish farmers who sheltered eight fellow citizens of Jewish origin: Gołda Grünfeld, Lea Didner with her little daughter and Saul Goldman with his four sons. Just before dawn on 24 March 1944, German gendarmes burst into the farm in Markowa. The Jews in hiding and their protectors were shot on the spot. The tragic victims included not only Józef Ulma and his pregnant wife Wiktoria but also their six young children.

The German Nazi occupation, the Holocaust and the mass crimes against Poles are profoundly important and still painful parts of the history of my homeland. Many of my compatriots shared the fate of the Ulma family. Every year on 24 March we celebrate a public holiday, the National Day of Remembrance for Poles who rescued Jews during German occupation.

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Poland was home to a very large Jewish community, one of the largest in the history of that nation. For centuries, Jews had sought to settle in our country, endowing it with the telling name 'Polin', which translates as 'here you will rest.' Poland provided them with peace and chances to grow, making Warsaw the world's second-largest Jewish population centre in the late 1930s.

The German plan for the total extermination of the Jews – horrifying in its inhuman, mechanical, almost industrial character – had to take these facts into account. Thus, in occupied Poland, the German Nazis created death factories – extermination camps for Jews from our country and other territories seized by the Third Reich. For centuries, Poland had been known as a tolerant country where Christian values shaped culture and social relations. Therefore, the German occupation authorities expected resistance to their criminal actions. To minimise defiance, they threatened death to anyone in our lands who even attempted to help a Jew in hiding. But despite these harsh sanctions, thousands of Polish Jews found life-saving aid. They were helped escape the ghetto and provided with hiding places, food, money and false documents.

Historians are still reconstructing the course of the dramatic events of those years. So far, more than seven thousand Poles, including Wiktoria and Józef Ulma, have been honoured with the title of Righteous Among the Nations, awarded by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem. In the venerable circle of the righteous, Poles are the largest national group. Polish authorities and state institutions continue their efforts to commemorate these silent, often anonymous heroes – especially those killed for their courage and sacrifice.

As Poles, we are proud that on 10 September 2023, the Ulma family, our compatriots, will be added to the ranks of the Blessed of the Catholic Church. The significance of this event goes beyond the religious dimension – it will also be a tribute to heroes embodying the highest ideals of humanity. The story of their martyrdom deserves global recognition, for although it is horrifying, it is also an empowering testament to loving one's neighbour. May it change hearts and be a model of openness and solidarity.

Andrzej Duda

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