



Wiktoria Ulma with her children. From the left: Władzio, Stasia with Marysia in her arms, Franuś (on the sheep), Basia and Antoś. Autumn, 1943. Photo from the collections of the Ulma family's relatives.

ARTYKUŁ

The Ulma Family: beatified Poles from Markowa

Author: **AGNIESZKA SZAJEWSKA** 12.10.2023

In the Podkarpacie province of Poland, near Łańcut, there lies the village of Markowa. In the Second World War, just like in many other villages in the country, the people had to face the brutal reality of the German occupation. In 1942, eight Jews were hiding in the Ulma family home. The Ulmas had to take care of six children at the time.

Józef Ulma came from a family of farmers. He graduated from an agricultural school in Pilzno and set up his own modern farm with his wife Wiktoria. He kept bees and silkworms, but he also had much success with an

apple tree nursery. He also popularised apple tree grafting among his neighbours.

Moreover, he was a social activist in the Catholic Male Youth Association and the Polish Farm Youth Association "Wici". For some time, he led the Milk Co-op and he and his wife attended the local theatre club. The Ulma family had a small bookcase in their family house where books were marked with the inscription "Family bookcase — Józef Ulma." The books included technical guides, but also works on the world, other peoples and cultures. As a modern landowner, Józef subscribed to the paper *Wiedza i życie* [Knowledge and life]. His skills and curiosity of the world allowed Józef to build a makeshift wind farm, which he used to light his house.

His most famous hobby, however, became his passion for photography. It is thanks to that passion that we now have such a rich source of iconographic knowledge on the village of Markowa from before and during the occupation. Ulma left behind more than 800 pictures, which ended up in the collections of the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II in Markowa.

Wiktoria Ulma, née Niemczak, took classes at the People's University in Gać. In 1935, she married Józef Ulma. She was a mother of seven children: Stanisław, Barbara, Władysław, Franciszek, Antoni, Maria and one still in the belly, unnamed at the time.



Wedding of Wiktoria and Józef Ulma, July 7, 1935. Photo from the collections of the Ulma family's relatives

In the face of the Holocaust

The Ulmas were very open and conscious people. They knew about the Holocaust's cruelty.

When the German occupiers began realising operation *Reinhardt*, aiming to exterminate Jews in the General Government, Józef and Wiktoria hid their neighbour and friends of Jewish origin in their hut (approx. 60 square

metres).

The men and women sheltered by the Ulmas were from the neighbourhood. Lea (or Layca) Didner (with her little daughter Reszla) and Gołda (also going by Genia) Grünfeld were the Ulmas' direct neighbours. They were daughters of Chaim Goldman, most likely a brother of Saul Goldman, who also hid at the Ulmas along with his four sons. He came from nearby Łańcut (where they were called the Szalla family).

Józef Ulma also helped one of the families hiding in the nearby forest build a shelter and delivered them food. In the vicinity of Markowa, the Germans organised multiple manhunts for Jews. They caught and shot many people this way. Rywka Trinczer, her two daughters and a granddaughter, thanks to Ulma's help, built a shelter in a forest in Husów, which kept them safe.

Nevertheless, it wasn't just the Ulmas who hid Jews in their homes. Markowa residents saved 21 people in total. Among those who saved Jews were the Cwynar and Szylak families. The Cwynars took in Abraham Segal, while the Szylaks hid Jews in the haystacks in the attic of their house. To hide it, the Szylaks would stack chests with hay in front of the Jews. Luckily, none of these families met the fate of the Ulmas, who were shot along with their children.

The crime in Markowa

The first reconstruction of the events that transpired on March 24, 1944, was made during the trial of Josef Kokott in 1958. The Czech *volksdeutsch* was handed over to the Poles by the Czechoslovakian authorities as a war criminal. The trial took place in Rzeszów. Kokott, accused of murdering some 150 people, did not admit to most of the crimes. He especially denied killing children (including those of the Ulma family in Markowa), even though multiple witnesses, including the Markowa village head Teofil Kielar and one of the wagon drivers, Edward Nawojski, testified that Kokott took an active role in the crime and personally shot at least three of the Ulma children.

Before dawn on March 24, 1944, five German gendarmes along with the blue police from Łańcut (between 4-6 officers) came to the Ulma family home. These included: Lieut. Eilert Dieken (commander), Michael Dziwulski, Erich Wilde, Josef Kokott and blue policemen Eustachy Kolman and Włodzimierz Leś — the officer who most likely told on Józef and Wiktoria that they sheltered people of Jewish origin. He owed a debt to Saul Goldman, whom he had offered shelter from the Germans in exchange for payment.



Wiktoria Ulma with her child.
Photo from the collections of the
Ulma family's relatives

The officers left the drivers away from the buildings, so they could surprise the sleeping family. The first to die were two brothers Goldman and Gołda Grünfeld. After this first execution, the gendarmes called the drivers to come, so they would spread the word what would happen to Poles saving Jews. Nawojski testified he witnessed the execution of Layka Didner and her child, the two Goldmans, and finally the Ulma family themselves — Wiktoria and Józef. Commander Dieken then decided that the children, lamenting after their parents, should be shot as well. In total, 17 people lost their lives in the execution.

During that time, village head Teofil Kielar with several other residents came to bury the bodies. Kielar asked Dieken why they killed the children too. He responded:

“So the community wouldn’t have a problem with them.”

The aforementioned Kokott, who later stood trial, ordered to search the bodies of killed Jews. One of the farmers called to dig the graves, Franciszek Szylar, saw one of the gendarmes taking the valuables of Gołda Grünfeld. The rest of the Germans stole the belongings of the Ulma family by loading it on their wagons. The same Szylar asked to bury the Ulmas (who were Catholic) and the Jews in two separate graves. After all of

that, the murderers threw a party on the crime site, drinking alcohol, and Kokott forbid the farmers from saying how many people were killed and sent them away.

Several days later, Józef's brother, Władysław Ulma, along with other men placed the bodies of the family in coffins and in 1945 the residents of Markowa took them to the cemetery. The Jews' bodies were taken by Jewish communities after the war.

Apart from Josef Kokott, sentenced to death (which was later changed to life in prison), the only other person to receive punishment was Włodzimierz Leś. In 1944, he was executed based on the sentence of the Command of the Polish Underground.



Wiktor Ulma with her children.

From the left: Władzio, Stasia with Marysia in her arms, Franuś (on the sheep), Basia and Antoś.

Autumn, 1943. Photo from the collections of the Ulma family's relatives.

Memory

On September 13, 1995, the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem gave a post mortem title of Righteous Among Nations of the World to Józef and Wiktor Ulma. In 2003, the Przemyśl diocese began the process of beatification for the family. The Ulmas received the title of Servants of God, and on March 24, 2004, a monument honouring the deaths of the Ulma family and the Jewish families was unveiled in Markowa.

On March 23, 2006, a primacy school and junior high in Markowa received the name The Servants of God: The Ulma Family. In 2010, the then president Lech Kaczyński gave the post mortem Order of Polonia Restituta to Wiktor and Józef Ulma.

In 2016, a museum in their name was opened in Markowa, dedicated to all Poles who who saved Jews during the Holocaust.

Since 2018, on the anniversary of the tragic events from Markowa, Poland celebrates the National Day of Remembrance for Poles Who Saved Jews Under the Nazi German Occupation. The holiday was established by the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda.

On September 10, 2023, the Ulma family from Markowa was beatified.

[BACK](#)