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Poland

Polish family's beatification for sheltering Jews stirs election controversy

Historians warn that the government is using event to overstate country's resistance to Holocaust

Raphael Minder and Barbara Erling in Warsaw 3 HOURS AGO

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Poland is set to celebrate the beatification of a family executed for sheltering Jews during Nazi Germany's occupation, as historians warn the government is using the event to overstate Polish resistance to the Holocaust ahead of a national election.

Józef and Wiktoria Ulma and their children will on Sunday be beatified, a step towards sainthood, in the village of Markowa in southeastern Poland, where they hid eight Jews in their farmhouse before being denounced to the Germans by a Polish policeman in 1944. The Germans shot the Ulmas after first killing the Jews.

While there is no doubt over the heroism of the Ulmas, who knew they risked the death penalty for their actions, the government's presentation of their story has prompted some scholars to [warn of Holocaust distortion](#).

The ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party is highlighting Polish values and its defence of national sovereignty as it [campaigns to win a third term in](#) office in the October 15 vote.

"The beatification will be a big pre-election demonstration, paid for by public money, to show PiS voters that only this party defends the 'honour of Poles' against accusations that during the war they killed Jews," said historian Adam Leszczyński, a professor at Warsaw's SWPS University. The event was "both a continuation of this government's historical policy and a campaign event", he added.

The Polish authorities deny the beatification is being used to overplay the help given by Poles to Jews during the German occupation. They also say the timing was set by the Vatican, after Pope Francis approved a martyrdom decree for the Ulmas last December.

“The time proximity between the elections in Poland and a decision made by the Catholic Church is a coincidence,” said Karol Nawrocki, president of the Institute of National Remembrance, the state agency charged with promoting Polish history. “I think that some people in Poland, in Europe and perhaps in the entire world think that everything here is about politics but I can’t see any links between politics and the beatification of the Ulmas.”



Demonstrators in Warsaw hold signs calling for wartime reparations from Germany © Aleksander Kalka/NurPhoto via Getty Images

In 2018, the PiS-led government introduced criminal sanctions against anyone accusing Poles of complicity in the Holocaust. But it backtracked, making it a civil offence and lifting the threat of imprisonment following protests from Israel, the US and others against a perceived Polish effort to stifle public debate.

“The tragedy of the Ulma family is being used in a very cynical way to promote the idea of the alleged universality of the rescue phenomenon,” said Jan Grabowski, history professor at the University of Ottawa.

Rescuing Jews was particularly dangerous “not because of the Germans, but because of the lack of social permission”, he said. “Antisemitism was strong, and [Polish rescuers] were most of all afraid of denunciation by their own neighbours.”

The Ulmas have already received recognition for their sacrifice. Since 2018 Poland has commemorated a national day of remembrance for Poles who saved Jews, held on the date on which the family was executed. In 1995 Israel's Yad Vashem Institute granted Józef and Wiktoria Ulma the title of Righteous among the Nations, given to non-Jewish people — including more than 7,000 Poles — who helped Jews.



Polish archbishop Adam Szal says it is 'normal and desirable' for politicians to be involved in the beatification celebrations © Darek Delmanowicz/EPA-EFE

The beatification comes amid tensions between Poland and Germany, fuelled by a [€1.3tn claim for wartime reparations](#) that Warsaw presented last autumn and that Berlin immediately rejected.

In July Poland's national railways sent a special train on the route between southeastern Poland and Berlin. The locomotive of the Germany-bound train was decorated with a photo of the Ulmas and the slogan: "Murdered by Germans for saving Jews during the second world war."

Germany's embassy in Warsaw told the Financial Times it viewed the beatification as "an important contribution to the commemoration of the victims of the German occupation in Poland".

Polish archbishop Adam Szal, who is responsible for organising the beatification, said it was "normal and desirable" to have politicians involved in the celebrations.

Referring to other Jews killed by Poles, Nawrocki said: "This situation proves that people behave in different ways. What is important to remember is that the Polish state never approved the killing of Jews. During the war thousands of Poles were murdered by German criminals for helping Jews."

However, Grabowski said Poland should also commemorate Jews murdered by Poles in Markowa.

Ron Riesenbach, whose Jewish father survived the war in the village, declined an invitation to travel from Canada to attend Sunday's beatification.

"I have video and audio recordings of my father and my grandfather describing their anxiety that their Markowa hiding place would be discovered not by the German authorities . . . but by the local Polish villagers who were actively looking for Jews to turn in for material rewards," Riesenbach wrote in a letter to Polish authorities and seen by the FT. "When your government and cultural authorities stop downplaying and denying the hard reality of the past, we can then come together for a better future."

This month Warsaw is hosting an exhibition that includes pictures taken by Józef Ulma, who was passionate about photography and assembled his own camera.

The display names the German commander who ordered the killings, but the Polish policeman who denounced the Ulmas is only described as one of the "blue police officers", a term used for local police who collaborated with the Germans.

In Markowa, a museum dedicated to Poles who saved Jews names the officer suspected as Włodzimierz Leś but says there is a lack of documented proof of his guilt. After Germany's defeat, he was shot by the Polish resistance army.

Konstanty Gebert, a journalist who has covered Polish-Jewish relations for more than 40 years, said more should be done to highlight conduct by Poles that stood in direct opposition to that of the Ulmas, adding: "By downplaying the widespread denunciations and the general lack of support for saving Jews, the museum downplays the scope of their heroism."

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