

August 19, 2023

Malgorzata Szlosek
Marshal's Office of the Podkarpackie Region
International Cooperation Section
m.szlosek@podkarpackie.pl

Dear Ms. Malgorzata Szlosek:

I am writing in response to the letter sent to me by Wladysaw Oryl and Archbishop Adam Szal on June the 20th inviting me to Markowa for the Ulma Family beatification ceremony in September of 2023.

As you know, the Bar family hid my Jewish father, his parents and two sisters for more than two years during the war in the same village as the Ulma family's heroic deeds. The Ulmas, the Bars and other Righteous Gentiles are indeed special and deserving of Poland's attention and honours, both religious and secular. They shared the rare characteristics of bravery, compassion, and a deep sense of decency in the face of evil.

After much careful thought, I have decided to decline your invitation. I have arrived at this decision after researching the historical narrative promoted in the *Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews* and after speaking with respected Holocaust scholars. I share your desire to bring attention to and honor to the martyrdom of the Ulma family. However, the reason that I will not attend this ceremony is because your museum, your national government and your religious authorities have failed to objectively communicate to the Polish people (and the world at large) that the remarkable sacrifice of the Ulma family and other Righteous Gentiles were a rare exception in the otherwise fraught history of Polish-Jewish relationships before and during World War II.

The sad fact is that only a tiny proportion of Polish gentiles put themselves at risk to help their Jewish neighbors during the thousands of 'Jew hunts', death camp deportations and liquidation actions that went on during those dark days. These despicable acts could not have been implemented so effectively by the German

occupiers without at least the tacit support (if not the active involvement) of Polish citizenry. The historical record is replete with evidence that many local Polish citizens watched passively, or worse, voluntarily supported these horrible acts. There is also clear evidence of collusion and participation in searches and betrayal of Jews by residents in the village of Markowa and surrounding region.

Besides the vast historical records, 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 occupying the region at that time, but rather by the local Polish villagers who were actively looking for Jews to turn in for material rewards.

It is painful to me and my cousins (all decedents of Holocaust survivors) that national initiatives such as those being promoted in your museum presents such an unbalanced narrative of the realities of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II. Yes, Poles were victims of Nazi oppression. But sadly, many were also perpetrators. Building on centuries of institutionalized antisemitism, too many ordinary Poles used the war and occupation as pretext for either cold-hearted passivity in the face of evil or active collaboration with the occupiers.

I share your vision of a reconciliation between Polish gentiles and Jews. However, the martyrdom of the Ulma family and the heroism of the Bar family can only be meaningful in the cleansing light of an honest, open, and contrite communication of the sad historical reality of Polish-Jewish relationships during World War II.

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.

Respectfully,

Ron Riesenbach
Toronto, Canada