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# Poland honours those who lost their lives to protects Jews in WWII

*On the National Day of Remembrance of Poles Who Rescued Jews, the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL) organises a memorial day with mass and a press briefing in memory of all those who lost their lives to save those of others.*

By Monika Stojowska

March 24 holds deep symbolic significance. On this day in 1944, the Ulma family was executed by the German gendarmerie. Józef Ulma, his pregnant wife Wiktorija, and their six young children were murdered, along with the eight Jews they were sheltering: Gołda

Grünfeld, Lea Didner, and her daughter, as well as Saul Goldman and his four sons. Since 2018, Poland has commemorated March 24 as the *National Day of Remembrance for Poles Who Rescued Jews Under German Occupation*.

March 24, 1941, also marks another dark chapter in history - the establishment of the Lublin Ghetto, a stark symbol of anti-Jewish hatred. "A city that once embraced diverse cultures and religions, integrating citizens of various backgrounds, was torn apart. One culture, one religion was forcibly removed and locked behind a fence," said Fr. Prof. Mirosław Kalinowski, Rector of the John Paul II University of Lublin, (KUL).

## Acts of courage and determination

A press briefing marking the day, on Monday, was preceded by official commemorations in Lublin, attended by local and regional authorities, as well as representatives from the Institute of National Remembrance's Lublin branch. The day's events began with a Mass at Lublin's archcathedral, followed by the opening of an exhibition dedicated to the Ulma family. Flowers were also laid at the home of Sister Marta Wołowska, who was executed for sheltering Jews near Stonim.

Referring to the National Day of Remembrance, Fr. Prof. Kalinowski emphasized: "This day carries special meaning, as it precedes the Day of the Sanctity of Life. We honor those who risked their lives to help persecuted Jews. They demonstrated immense courage and determination, fully aware that they and their loved ones faced the death penalty. The example of the Righteous - these hidden heroes - shines brightly and encourages us not to hesitate when others seek our help."

## Little known abroad

The Ulma family's story, widely known in Poland, was virtually unknown abroad until recently, a fact highlighted by Manuela Tulli, co-author of the book *They Even Killed the Children: The Story of the Ulma Family, Martyrs Who Helped Jews*, produced in collaboration with the Catholic University of Lublin. "Very little is said abroad about Poles who rescued Jews. Together with Fr. Paweł Rytel-Andrianik, we introduced the Ulmas' story to Italy. Now, it is incredibly well-known - we've moved an entire country," the journalist shared.

## Heroic women in habits

"Several studies have been published on the wartime activities of religious sisters and their assistance to Jewish children and families. Yet, figures like Sister Marta Wołowska remain largely unknown. Research conducted by a team of nuns within a historical commission aims to identify each sister by name. We now know that 2,345 sisters were involved in helping Jews. Lublin-based researchers continue to document their lives and

efforts," explained Sister Dr. Monika Kupczewska of the Center for Historical Geography of the Church at KUL, who also chairs the Historical Commission of the Conference of Major Superiors of Female Religious Orders in Poland.

She added that these brave women came from numerous congregations in Poland - both cloistered and active, wearing habits and not. Rescuing Jews was far easier in other European countries, whereas in Poland, such acts were punishable by death.

## Unique testimonies of clergy rescuing Jews

Through the work of the Abraham J. Heschel Center for Catholic-Jewish Relations, the Catholic University of Lublin preserves the memory of Jewish heritage not only in Poland but globally. One such effort is the book on the Ulma family, as well as a two-volume English-language monograph by lawyer and historian Ryszard Tyndorf, titled "Wartime Rescue of Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy." This extensive, 1,200-page work is available online for free at <https://tiny.pl/s8xxn5vc>. The book primarily contains testimonies from Jews rescued by religious sisters and priests in Poland during the Holocaust.

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