“Testimony of help” exhibition in Rzeszów, 9-24 September 2023

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“Świadectwo poMOCY” [Testimony of help/power] (“pomocy” (Gen.) in Polish means “help” and “mocy” (Gen.) means “power”) is an interactive educational project carried out by the Institute of National Remembrance as part of the solemn celebration of the beatification of the Ulma family. The project consists of two parts: a film etude in virtual reality (VR) and an immersive exhibition. The two-part installation will be located in a special mobile container. The premiere show will take place on 9 September 2023 in Rzeszów, and then the whole show will be presented for two weeks from 10 to 24 September. After this date, the exhibition will be available for free on Steam.

The idea of the exhibition is based on the story of the tragedy of the family of Wiktoria and Józef Ulma from Markowa that happened on 24 March 1944, which is the starting point for reflection on humanity, on the ethical sources of the attitude inspired by the human impulse of love, the attitude of selfless help to those in need. The exhibition shows the fate of the Ulma family in a broad context: as a symbol, an archetype of attitude characteristic of Poles, a kind of “Polishness gene”. When visiting the exhibition, we will get an answer to the following question evidenced by examples: are we, Poles, sensitive to human harm and are we still able to help others, to the best of our capabilities and despite our imperfections, remembering the attitude of our ancestors, and in particular Wiktoria and Józef Ulma, who helped Jews during World War II?

The exhibition begins outside the mobile container, because its seemingly uniform black walls, when seen up close, are covered with hundreds of names and places associated with Poles helping Jews. After entering the container, in the centre of the room we will see an installation with 30 wooden chairs, with VR sets lying on them and ready for use, enabling visitors to enter the world of Virtual Reality. The VR exhibition, which can also be viewed without goggles, tells the story of the Ulma family – the viewer is taken to several interiors stylised as actual rooms from the 1940s, showing the realities of the Podkarpacie countryside. The combination of historical artefacts (photographs, documents) with narrative helps to understand the events which took place in Markowa, as well as to discover the message of the exhibition. The last of the virtual rooms is a small village cinema hall, where a film about the Ulma family is played. It is not a coincidence that after removing the goggles, the eyes of the visitors can see previously invisible exhibits bathed in ultraviolet light. What is black – becomes colourful, what is empty – takes on a form, building hope, arousing emotions, igniting the imagination. On the walls we can see photographs from various periods, dates, places, names, slogans – illustrating the recalled events and examples of helping those in need. For obvious reasons, the starting point is the uplifting examples of Poles helping Jews and other people in need during World War II, and next to them – examples of helping hundreds of thousands of refugees from the lands incorporated into the Reich, from the Zamość region and from the uprising Warsaw. After the end of the war, we did not lose our sensitivity to the needs of others, enthusiastically rebuilding Warsaw, donating blood to Hungary during the uprising in 1956, creating in 1980 the multi-million “Solidarity” movement. We also have examples of social solidarity during the period of political transformation, for example the reaction of Poles to the Great Flood of 1997, helping other countries during natural disasters. Last year, Poles once again proved that they can honestly and selflessly help their neighbours, as millions of Ukrainians, mostly women and children, flowed to Poland after the outbreak of the Ukrainian-Russian war. Once again, Poles have proven that they help other people in need, that the Ulma blood still flows in us, that: “This is our heritage”. The exhibition was based on the sources of the Institute of National Remembrance, photographs from Mateusz Szpytma’s album entitled “Sprawiedliwi i ich świat. Markowa w fotografii Józefa Ulmy” [“The Righteous and Their World. Markowa in the Photographs of Józef Ulma”]. Thanks to making it available on Steam, it will be possible to give, based on a virtual exhibition, a history lesson using one of three scenarios for students at the level of the eight grade of primary school or higher and use an interactive historical quiz. We invite you to familiarise yourself with the project at the Institute of National Remembrance Branch in Rzeszów at ul. Juliusza Słowackiego 18, from 10 to 24 September, between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., and from 25 September on Steam. Admission is free, after prior registration for the screening. In order to make an obligatory reservation, you must fill out the form available HERE and read and accept the terms and conditions for using VR goggles. Minors should take the consent of a parent or legal guardian with them.

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