Speech by Lili Pohlman in honour of Archbishop Metropolitan Andrei, Count Sheptyts’kyi

Your Eminence, Distinguished Professors and Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Lili Pohlman and my maiden name was Stern. I was born here in Lwów, but have lived in London, England since 1946. I am no historian – nor am I an academician but I am a witness to history, at least to some events, and I have come here, after an absence of sixty years and three months for one reason and one reason only to pay respect and homage to a great man – His Holiness the Archbishop Metropolitan Andrei, Count Sheptyts’kyi.

I have given depositions and testified on his behalf countless times – in spoken word, in writing, and on film – all are to be found in various museums round the world, in Holocaust exhibitions and in books – but never before have I addressed such a distinguished and influential audience, as this. I shun speaking in public, but the moment I was invited to attend this conference I knew I had to be here in order to testify yet again foremost to defend the good name of this remarkable man…this Great Ukrainian...

To have survived the Nazi occupation in L’viv, is in itself a miracle; if I stand here before you today it is thanks to the infinite humanity, infinite courage and infinite loving-kindness of the Metropolitan. For it is this saintly and noble man, who in the most inhuman times in history – at the risk to his own life, as well as the lives of many nuns, monks and priests – dared to give sanctuary to the persecuted Jewish people, not only within His own residence of St. Jur, but, at His recommendation, within Uniate monasteries, and convents and orphanages of the Studite Order. He despatched letters to priests, ordering that they be read to the congregations in all Churches. In these he warned his people – and I quote – that ‘anyone helping the Nazis to persecute or kill Jews will be doomed to eternal damnation’

What more could an old, ailing, paralysed man do, than to protest thus? And did he not, by this very act alone, defy the Nazi regime – and their willing collaborators from within the Ukrainian community? Did he not, by example, show them up for murderers that they were? Did the Head of any other Church dare to protest, as he did, in his well-documented letter to the top echelons of the Nazi Regime? And when writing to Pope Pius XII, did He not begin by apologizing for not writing since the occupation of Lvov by the Nazis, for fear that His letter ‘…might fall into the hands of those who should not be. reading it…” In the same letter He says, and I quote, ‘the German rule is wicked, almost diabolical – by far surmounting that of the Bolsheviks…”Are these the words of a ‘collaborator’? Can any evidence for the so-called ‘co-operation’ on his side outweigh His acts of goodness and Christian charity?

If one refers to the infamous letter of 1941, it is important to bear in mind the climate of the times – that it was written at the time when the German army was seen as ‘the rescuer from the persecution of the Bolsheviks’ who were offering false hope for a free and independent Ukraine. This letter was written at the time when no one – I stress, no-one – not even the Jews – could envisage what the ‘civilised’ Germans were capable of…The moment He saw and understood their intentions, however, he did not remain silent – He acted, and His actions spoke louder than words… He fought with his pen – and His pen was mightier than the proverbial sword. Let us not forget His well-known Encyclical letter of 1942 entitled: ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ Are these the words of a ‘collaborator’? What a cruel perversion of the truth!

*Scripta manent* – yet despite all existing documentation and written proofs, the good name of one of the greatest humanitarians of our times is constantly being maligned and besmeared by unjust allegations and accusations. Is not a man who was instrumental in rescuing from the Shoah between 150- 200 lives, primarily children (including boys which put the Church and the priests in yet greater danger!) – is not such a man a *righteous man*? To shelter and protect 150- 200 Jews – and not a single one. denounced or handed over to the authorities! And that at the time when collaboration of the notorious Ukrainian militia in the roundups and bestial killings of the Jews was rampant! This has made the Metropolitan’s stand even more precarious and his situation totally different than in any other occupied country of Europe...

I met Metropolitan Sheptyts’kyi when, under the cover of a cold November night in 1943, we were brought with my mother and a couple named Podoshin, to St. Jur. We were ushered by a young monk to an elegant, warm room, probably the library and were asked to make ourselves comfortable while waiting. After a short while, the main door
opened and the Metropolitan was wheeled in... A giant of a man, even in the sitting position. His iõesque mane of white hair and long white beard gave him the appearance of a saintly patriarch. He looked at us from behind black-rimmed spectacles, his beautiful steel blue eyes so very kind. He must have had the impression that I stood in awe of him which I most probably was – or was it simply because I was a child? – because he beckoned to me gently and asked me to come closer. When I did, admittedly with some trepidation – he held me close and stroking my hair he said in Ukrainian: ‘Do not be afraid my child, no harm will come to you here, here you are safe.’ And immediately I felt safe. An unforgettable moment... He than exchanged a few words in Ukrainian with Mr. Podoshin – his pharmacist – and turned to my mother who unfortunately spoke no Ukrainian, but this did not make any difference. With tears in his eyes, the Metropolitan listened when she told him that by now the only ones from the entire family to remain alive were she and I. My father and my six-year-old little brother, my grandparents and all the more distant family, were either brutally murdered or sent to extermination camps in the years of 1942-3. The Gestapo aided and abetted by the Ukrainian Militiamen were responsible for these atrocities.

The Metropolitan gave us immediate shelter, food, warmth, comfort - and within a few days we were moved to a convent, orphanage and monastery. At his instructions, my mother and I were not to be separated; we were sent to Ubozc – a convent and orphanage run by Studite nuns, whose Mother Superior, was Abbess Yosifa – a wonderful woman! She took my mother into her private quarters and as my mother spoke no Ukrainian, Sister Yosifa suggested that from now on my mother will be deaf and dumb... Should anyone other than herself address my mother at any time she must remain deaf and dumb. She provided my mother with a sewing machine and so she became the seamstress for both the convent and the orphanage. In the meantime, I was in the orphanage attached to the convent, a partly Polish, partly Ukrainian child, since my Ukrainian was not yet fluent. My name was Lidia Ostrowska – my mother became Julia Popowycz. Mother Superior provided a genuine birth certificate for my mother, which belonged to one of her relatives, a country peasant. What courage! I had no papers at all. The nuns and Sisters were all wonderful and kind to us – we were fed and clad and looked after in the best way possible. Mother Superior was posthumously recognised by Yad Vashem as a ‘Righteous Amongst the Nations’ and Yad Vashem sent me a copy of the certificate some years back. I don’t know who – if anyone at all – received the medal on her behalf. After Sister Yosifa (whose real name was Olena Witer) and the nuns were banned by the Soviet Authorities from Ubozc to Skalat near Tarnopol – we were sending them parcels from London which helped them to survive. According to the correspondence exchanged between my mother and Sister Yosifa, these parcels kept them alive. I have one of her letters here with me. She died in 1988 and is buried in Brzuchowice. I wish I could put a flower on her grave to say: ‘Thank You!’ At least my mother and I were able to repay, in a modest way, those brave and wonderful, nuns for their humanity and loving-kindness.

As I said before, Yad Vashem – acknowledging our testimonies and depositions – bestowed their medal upon the Righteous Sister Yosifa – Olena Witer. Sadly, however, the same cannot be said in the case of the Metropolitan Sheptyts’kyi. Despite their motto being: ‘Whosoever saves one life saves the word entire’, after all these years Yad Vashem still refuse to recognise one of the most righteous of men among the nations: this great humanitarian. It is time to rectify this injustice!

There is no substantial evidence that the Metropolitan supported the establishment of the Waffen-SS Galizien – but, fortunately, there is adequate live evidence that He saved the lives of Jews... To mention but a few of them, the Family of the late Rabbi Dr Dawid Kahane of L’viv; the two sons of the brutally murdered close friend of the Metropolitan, Rabbi Dr Ezekiel Lewin of L’viv the two sons of the late Dr Chaneides, Chief Rabbi of Katowice; Adam Daniel Rotfeld until recently Poland’s Foreign Minister; the Podoshin Family; my late mother Cecylia Stern, myself and many more...

In a few days’ time it will be sixty years since the death of this splendid man. I still remember very vividly the stately funeral procession at the end of November 1944, attended by many dignitaries and hundreds, if not thousands, going through the streets of Lwow. Such funerals are not accorded to collaborators!...

For over sixty years, I could not pluck up the courage to come back to this beautiful city of mine, a city once so nobly called Leopolis, but which, tragically, for my Mother and for me, became Necropolis...
But I am here today – a very emotional journey in time… I am here, because I owe a debt of gratitude to this Man – I am here, because I hope to be able to bring some justice to this case, and foremost, I am here to plead from this platform with the committee of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, to acknowledge the Archbishop Metropolitan Andrei Count Sheptyts’kyi for the man that he was: a great humanitarian and saviour of Jewish lives.

I know I speak for all the globe, who cannot be here today, but who owe their lives and the lives of the generations to follow, to the sanctity of this one man… Please remember: whosoever saves one life…

Thank you, Ladies and Gentleman