



Landmarks Preservation Commission

Sarah Carroll
Chair

March 31, 2022

Marialena Giampino
Elmhurst History and Cemeteries Preservation Society

Re: **88-28 43rd Avenue, Queens**

Dear Ms. Giampino:

Thank you for your request for evaluation of the Walentyna and Aleksander Janta-Polczynski house at 88-28 43rd Avenue in Elmhurst, Queens. We acknowledge and apologize for the time that it has taken to respond. Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) Research Department staff has thoroughly reviewed available documentation of the Janta-Polczynskis' lives in Europe and in the United States and evaluated the house based on its association with them, applying standards for designation under the Landmarks Law as well as national standards for evaluating properties based on their association with notable people. These standards require that a property be associated with the productive life of the individual in the field in which (s)he achieved significance, and that it can be documented as representing an individual's significant contributions to history. This review process has been rigorous, and as a result lengthy due to several factors, first among them the agency's need to meet the threshold for documenting that this house represents the Janta-Polczynskis' significant contributions to the history of New York City, New York State, or the nation.

LPC recognizes the incredible contributions of immigrants and immigrant communities to shaping the history and culture of New York City. From our research and the many letters we received, we also recognize that the Janta-Polczynskis were important historical figures. However, we are tasked with documenting their contributions while living at 88-28 43rd Avenue. Our research indicates that their significant contributions occurred before they moved to this house; and while they were important within their community, had a rare book business and welcomed many notable people to their house, this does not rise to the level of significance necessary for consideration as a landmark. We know this is not the answer you have wanted, and I would like to provide some more background for how we reached this determination.

As a regulatory agency, LPC must apply consistent standards for the documentation and designation of landmarks. Research Department staff assesses potentially meritorious properties in light of many factors, including architectural, historical and cultural significance, agency priorities in all five boroughs, and the importance of the resource in the context of similar and/or already designated resources. When evaluating buildings where notable people lived as potential individual landmarks, we have adopted the national historic preservation standards that prioritize properties in which a person lived at the time they made significant, noteworthy and influential contributions to culture, society, or politics, which were widely recognized within the city, state, or nation, and can be documented as representing that individual's significant contributions to history. Properties that pre-or post-date an individual's significant accomplishments, therefore, are usually not considered significant for consideration as landmarks.

Before moving to the United States, Walentyna and Aleksander Janta-Polczynski both made notable contributions to Poland. As secretary to General Władysław Sikorski and a translator for the Polish Government in Exile during World War II, Walentyna was involved in intelligence gathering and providing



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accounts of atrocities against Jewish people, and after the war, she served in the Women's Auxiliary Service of the Polish Army and as a translator in Germany where she interviewed former concentration camp inmates who had been victims of inhumane medical experiments. Aleksander was a Polish journalist and writer who traveled extensively prior to World War II when it is said he interviewed notable figures including Mahatma Gandhi. As a war correspondent in World War II, he was taken prisoner by Germans and described his experiences in an autobiography published in 1944, *I Lied to Live*. After World War II, Walentyna and Aleksander emigrated to the United States. They married in 1949 and lived in Buffalo for a decade before purchasing the house at 88-28 43rd Avenue in c. 1959. The house itself is a modest shingle-style home, constructed ca. 1900 and altered c. 1960 by the Janta-Polczynskis. It has been noted that Polish and Eastern European literary figures visited their house in Elmhurst—where they had a rare book business—as well as their cottage on Long Island. The two are remembered as important figures within the Polish émigré community and members of Polish organizations in New York.

In its careful evaluation of the property, LPC staff researched available documentation of the Janta-Polczynskis' activities while they lived at 88-28 43rd Avenue. LPC then looked at other landmarks that were designated primarily for their associations with prominent people. For example, the Audre Lorde, Alice Austen, James Baldwin, Louis Armstrong, Lewis Latimer, Charlie Parker, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Bunche residences are all strongly associated with these significant individuals' productive years when they made important and influential contributions within their respective fields, and their designation reports document this thoroughly. In contrast, the Janta-Polczynskis made their most important contributions to history before emigrating to the United States, and there is very little primary-source documentation of the couple's significant activities in their home in Elmhurst. This makes assigning historical significance to their home in Elmhurst very challenging in terms of designation standards.

There is no question that Walentyna and Aleksander Janta-Polczynski made important contributions to Polish history through their activities in Europe in the 1930s and 40s before emigrating to the United States. They have been honored for this work by the Polish government, Polish American organizations and individuals, and their papers are preserved in the National Library in Warsaw. The street they lived on has been renamed in their honor. In our process, however, applying historic preservation standards focused on the specific connection of a building with a person's significant contributions to history, we have not found that the house meets the threshold of association with the activities for which the couple is considered significant, nor is it sufficiently documented as representing their significant contributions to history. Therefore, the house does not appear to rise to the level of an individual landmark.

We appreciate the tremendous outpouring of support for the recognition of the lives of the Janta-Polczynskis. LPC will seek to work with the community to find ways to honor the history of the Janta-Polczynskis as well as the contributions of the Polish emigre and Polish American community in New York City.

Sincerely,

Kate Lemos McHale
Director of Research