

## Were These Ordinary Poles?

by

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Ever since the book *Neighbors*<sup>1</sup> by Jan Tomasz Gross was published in Poland, the subject has become part of the public agenda. *Neighbors* is a slender volume, containing only 120 pages of text and forty additional pages of photographs—added by the Polish publisher—of Jews from the town of Jedwabne in its pre-war era. This has given *Neighbors*, which is not a work of historical research in the accepted academic sense, the status of a memorial volume.

*Neighbors* opened a huge Pandora's box from which demons and spirits of the past have leaped out. In their wake, issues concerning Polish-Jewish relations before, during, and after the Holocaust have resurfaced. Again people are looking into the characteristics of Polish Antisemitism and asking whether it had something to do with the results of the Nazis' murderous actions. Furthermore, the debate over Jewish collaboration with the Soviet regime that attacked Poland in 1939—and annexed parts of its territory—and over the role played by Jews in consolidating the Stalinist apparatus in post-war Poland has become more pointed.

Jedwabne is in the Łomża county of the Białystok District. On the eve of the war, it had a population of about 2,500, including approximately 1,600 Jews. The Germans first entered Jedwabne in September 1939, as they did other areas in eastern Poland. They torched the local synagogue, placed the Jewish population under curfew, and seized anything they needed, as they did in hundreds of Polish towns that came under their heel. About three weeks later, however, they retreated and handed the area over to the Soviets in accordance with prior bilateral agreements.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). The book was originally written in Polish as *Sąsiedzi: Historia Zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicze, 2000).

When the Soviets came in, an anti-Communist resistance group organized in Jedwabne but was denounced and uncovered a short time later. Its members were arrested, several were exiled, and others were executed along with additional inhabitants of the area who were suspected of anti-Communist activity. In all these respects, Jedwabne was not markedly different from hundreds of other locations in the annexed territories, from the Lithuanian border in the north to the Ukraine in the south. According to persistent rumors in Jedwabne, it was a Jew who had denounced the resistance group. Postwar research, however, has disproved the rumors; the denouncer was a Pole.

Life in Jedwabne in 1939–1941, as described in Gross’s book and in the memorial volume published by the few survivors of the Jedwabne Jewish community in Israel and in the United States,<sup>2</sup> was undistinguished from life in other small localities in the Soviet-annexed territories. Several Jews held positions in the governing apparatus, but this was undoubtedly a local phenomenon and conferred neither substantive influence nor political power. Generally speaking, life in Jedwabne went on with no shocks or dramatic changes.

On June 23, 1941, the Germans occupied Jedwabne and immediately took actions that inflicted abuse and injury on the Jewish population, as they did in other Soviet localities that they occupied. Members of various nationalities—Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Belorussians, Ukrainians, and Russians—took part in these actions, amidst local variations reflecting the circumstances that the German occupation created. In Jedwabne, the non-German participants were the Poles. The current controversy concerns the events that ensued in the two weeks after the onset of the occupation: was it the Germans who encouraged the slaughter of the Jews? Was it done by collaborator-provocateurs who came in from the outside? Was the massacre initiated by criminals and hooligans from surrounding villages who coveted the Jews’ property?

On July 10, 1941, the Germans in Jedwabne convened a meeting with the leaders of the town’s Polish population. The Poles agreed to help the Germans round up the Jews and concentrate them in the town square in

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<sup>2</sup> *Jedwabne Book, History and Remembrance* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, New York: Committee of Jedwabne Expatriates, 1980).

advance of deportation. In the Białystok District, two German police battalions engaged in the murder of Jews, and years ago Polish researchers charged them with responsibility for the liquidation of the Jews of Jedwabne. However, matters in Jedwabne unfolded differently.

The Jews whose Polish neighbors drove them from their homes underwent grave humiliations and abuse as they were led to the market square. They were beaten with rods and metal poles, pelted with stones, and slashed with knives. Not a few lost their lives in the course of this brutal *Aktion*. After the Poles gathered them in the square, they led the survivors of the pogrom to a large granary, which they set ablaze. The entire Jewish community of Jedwabne, some 1,600 people (the minimizers speak of approximately 1,200, or even “only” 800 human beings) was obliterated within several hours, apart from a few survivors who managed to escape or survived under the protection of several local Poles who concealed them. There were Germans in Jedwabne on that bitter day, but their involvement in the massacre was negligible. They witnessed and photographed the slaughter. Unfortunately, this photographic material has not been found in the archives, but Gross is convinced that it will eventually turn up.

Immediately after the war, the Jewish Historical Commission that had begun to operate in Poland gathered testimony about the Jedwabne affair; it may be viewed today in the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Gross used this testimony, given by Szmul Wasersztajn—one of the few survivors of the slaughter—as an important if not a main source in his reconstruction of the events. In 1949, twenty-one persons who had taken part in the massacre were indicted in the court in Łomża for collaboration with the German occupier. Nine of them were convicted and sentenced to prison terms of eight to fifteen years. One was sentenced to death.

A tally drawn up by Gross, on the basis of lists of people identified as having participated in the murders in Jedwabne, led him to conclude that at least ninety-two men—about half of the adult male population of the town—had taken part in the massacre. They were, as he writes, “ordinary men” (*zwykli ludzie*).

By using this expression, he adopts the concept coined by the American historian Christopher Browning.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the occurrence and the facts did not spend the ensuing sixty years mothballed in the silent archives of the Communist regime in Poland. In 1966, a researcher from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Szymon Datner, wrote about them with evasive caution in a study of the Jews of Białystok and the district during the Holocaust. Datner, basing himself on the same detailed testimony that Gross used thirty-five years later (that of Szmul Wasersztajn), stated that the Jews in Jedwabne met their death in a pogrom that took place in the town.<sup>4</sup> Datner did not identify with any certainty the party responsible for the slaughter. The political realities in Poland under Communist rule and the problematic nature of the historiography of Holocaust-era Polish Jewry at that time thwarted full and documented publication of the events. Historians outside of Poland, too—in Israel and the United States—paid no special attention to the incident, even after the testimonies and details were published in the community’s memorial book in 1980.<sup>5</sup> The tragedy of the Jews of Jedwabne was subsumed and blended into the larger account of the annihilation of Polish Jewry; no thought was given to its unique significance. The story of the murder of 1,600 Jews amidst the extermination of some 2,900,000 Polish Jews naturally evokes limited interest, especially since the episode was not copiously documented.

### Jewish Collaboration?

*Neighbors*, as stated, is not a work of historical research. It is far from being a monograph on the history of the Jews of Jedwabne and the vicinity. It rests on a narrow documentary base, mainly the testimony of Szmul Wasersztajn and other survivors, and of several Poles, foremost those who swam against the

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992). Browning thus defined the members of Reserve Battalion 101 of the German Police, who murdered Jews in the town of Józefów (eastern Poland) and elsewhere. Since then, this loaded expression has become a landmark in Holocaust and genocide historiography. Browning attempts to explain the transformation of ordinary men into murderers even though they lack an evident ideological motive, preparation, special training, or prior identification with murderous motivation.

<sup>4</sup> Szymon Datner, “Ekstremacja Ludności Żydowskiej w Okręgu Białostockim,” *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 60 (October–December 1966), p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Jedwabne Book*, p. 92.

tide and assisted Jews. Gross also makes extensive use of documents from the postwar trial. Neither is *Neighbors* a “local history” of Jedwabne, the sort of work that would use methodological techniques of social and economic history to probe the long-term development of interethnic relations between Poles and Jews in that locality. *Neighbors* is a terse, dramatic, and shocking document that records a period of several days in a unique historical situation. More than an attempt to provide answers, it evokes a lengthy series of questions.

However, *Neighbors* has instigated an important debate on several main questions in the history of Polish-Jewish relations during and after the war, especially in regard to collaboration with the enemy. This question has two aspects: Jewish collaboration with the Soviets; and local Polish collaboration with the Germans in murdering the Jews in 1941.

Gross discusses this issue extensively in his other studies, and, in this respect, *Neighbors* rests on a broader theoretical basis laid out by the author in his previous works. In them he discusses the characteristics and implications of collaboration in East European society, wartime Polish society in the various occupied areas, and the Jewish image in Poland during and after the war. In his first book, on Polish society in the *Generalgouvernement*, Gross states that an occupation regime can easily find collaborators if remnants of the prior legitimate political regime in the area have been preserved. If there are no such remnants (as was the case in Poland), the occupier turns to national minorities that are in conflict with the majority and searches among them for groups and organizations that will help him consolidate his rule. This was the case in Slovakia and Croatia, and, to some extent, among Ukrainians and Lithuanians in 1941.<sup>6</sup>

Several participants in the debate on Gross’s book have repeatedly taken up the issue of Jewish-Soviet collaboration in the annexed territories. The Jews greeted the Red Army that invaded Poland in September 1939, with bouquets, denounced Polish patriots to the NKVD, and took up high-ranking positions in the bureaucracy. This explanation has been cited not only in Polish right-wing circles but also in academic circles. One of the leading Polish historians,

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, *Polish Society Under German Occupation. The Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 123.

Tomasz Strzembosz, who specializes mainly in the history of the eastern territories during World War II, wrote an article on this matter entitled, “Covered-up Collaboration” (*Przemilczana Kolaboracja*). Obviously no explanation can justify the horrendous crime, Strzembosz writes. However, the question of Jewish-Soviet collaboration is essential to understanding the historical and political context of what happened. Strzembosz offers an explanation: the events in Jedwabne were not an undifferentiated eruption of anti-Jewish violence but an understandable, if wholly unjustifiable, act of political reprisal.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the murders were prompted neither by Antisemitism, nor by a jettisoning of basic human values, nor by coveting of Jewish property. Instead, they had a political context.

If so, what sort of Jewish-Soviet collaboration could have led to such a violent eruption against the Jews in 1941? Gross argues that the infrastructure of interests and the social basis of collaboration, as well as justification of the collaboration from the collaborator’s standpoint, exist in a country where the occupier’s needs are consistent with the outlook of the occupied people. This occurs where a certain social circle in the occupied country has long sympathized with the occupier’s political and social message and order, and, in view of the defeat on the battlefield and its result—the occupation<sup>8</sup>—this social and political circle is willing to strike an opportunistic compromise. Although it acquiesces to the political reality for lack of choice, this acquiescence causes the collaborators no ideological discomfort.

In view of this theory, it is no wonder that research on the extent of collaboration in Europe with the Nazi regime focuses mainly on the Vichy regime in France and the regimes of Jozef Tiso in Slovakia and Ante Pavelic in Croatia. Collaboration with the Nazis came about mostly due to political apparatuses that protagonists in the occupied country had in common with the occupation regime; it rested on common interests and mechanisms of dialogue and understanding. Where these were absent, the mechanism at

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<sup>7</sup> Tomasz Strzembosz, “Przemilczana Kolaboracja,” *Rzeczpospolita*, January 27, 2001; also appeared in English as “Covered-up Collaboration,” in William Brand, ed., *Thou Shalt Not Kill; Poles on Jedwabne* (Warsaw: Więź, 2001), pp. 163-181.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, “Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration,” in Istvan Deak, Jan T. Gross, Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe, World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 26–27.



work was not collaboration but coercion, i.e., duress, terror, and enmity that the holder of power applied against his subjects. Thus, for example, the Judenrat cannot be categorized as collaborationist organizations. The Jews were never a national participant with whom the Germans wished to work out a relationship of structural cooperation, and *a fortiori* one cannot speak of ideological comfort between the two sides—Jews and Germans—of the collaboration equation.

However, what about Jews in the Soviet-annexed eastern territories? Gross himself, who has explored events in these territories in considerable depth, categorically dismisses the claim of a unique Jewish collaboration.<sup>9</sup> He does so not because no Jews greeted the Red Army with satisfaction and favor; some Jews did respond in this way, especially in small rural localities such as Jedwabne. Some Jews also took up positions in workplaces and organizations that the new regime had established, or continued to work in small enterprises that they had owned before. In a small locality such as Jedwabne, like many small towns, it was hard to find another way to get by.<sup>10</sup> It is true that some Jews in the eastern territories held bureaucratic positions, joined local militia, or served as agents of the secret police. However, Gross states, they were no different from the rest of the population, among whom, too, some people became part of the Soviet-occupation apparatus. Yet only Jews who held such positions became marked for attack and were collectively identified as collaborators.

There were several reasons for the favorable reception given the Red Army as it marched into the eastern territories in September 1939. One of the main factors, in Gross's opinion, was the violent eruptions of villagers in frontier zones (*kresy*), in September 1939, against landowners and Jews. Instability and violence were predominant in those areas, and it was only natural that a minority whose existence was as shaky as that of the Jews would be glad to welcome a regime that promised to restore stability and order. What is more, the Soviet regime vowed to combat Antisemitism and ban discrimination. However, Jews preferred Soviet rule to the German terror regime mainly

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<sup>9</sup>Idem, "The Jewish Community in the Soviet Annexed Territories on the Eve of the Holocaust: A Social Scientist's View," *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 6 (Spring 1992), pp. 198–199.

<sup>10</sup>*Jedwabne Book*, p. 92.

because rumors about that regime had already reached eastern Poland with the waves of refugees.<sup>11</sup>

Almost all post-Communist Polish historiography on the World War II era agrees that the horrors of the German occupation and the horrors of the Soviet occupation in Poland were absolutely identical. According to Polish historical memory, which Poles are free to express today, this was a war in which Poland was occupied by two occupying powers. However, the issue is no longer limited to the familiar world of stereotypes, in which the well-worn Jew = Communist (*Żydokomuna*) tautology of previous years corresponds to a reality in which an individual Jew in the eastern territories denounces Polish patriots to the Soviet security police, or greets the Red Army with flowers as it occupies Polish territory.<sup>12</sup> It has long since been shown that not only Jews greeted the Soviet tanks that rolled into eastern Poland, on September 17, 1939, with bouquets and holiday dress. Some Ukrainians did the same, because they were glad to be rid of the Polish state forever. Even some Poles, especially peasants, showered the Red Army soldiers with blessings.<sup>13</sup>

The Polish historian Andrzej Żbikowski noted that the authors of most reports about this enthusiastic reception—reports that reached the Polish government-in-exile in London—came from Polish political circles associated with the resistance and with “London Poland,” or Jewish elements, mainly Zionist activists, whose accounts were biased due to their political outlook. Thus, a grim depiction of potentially violent Jewish treason steadily took shape, although it was not manifested so dramatically at the time of the occurrence itself in September 1939.<sup>14</sup>

There is no doubt, however, that Jews and Poles had different interests in this war. While the Jews wished to support any player that could repel, impede, or avert the menace of annihilation that they faced, the Poles had interests

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<sup>11</sup> In this matter, see Jan Tomasz Gross’s excellent article, “Ja za takie wyzwolenie dziękuję i proszę ich żeby to był ostatni raz,” in idem, *Upiorna Dekada: trzy eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i Komunistów 1939–1948* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 1998), pp. 61-92.

<sup>12</sup> In this matter, see Krystyna Kersten’s important book, *Polacy, Żydzi, Komunizm, Anatomia półprawd 1939-68* (Warsaw: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, *Revolution from Abroad, The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 29-31.

<sup>14</sup> Andrzej Żbikowski, “Jewish Reaction to the Soviet Arrival in the Kresy in September 1939,” *Polin* 13 (2000), p. 65.



pertaining to borders and territories in the eastern lands. The existential Jewish interest necessitated support of the Soviet Union, since only the USSR, with its military might, could protect that interest. Accordingly, from 1942 on, Jews also supported pro-Soviet organizational actions by Polish Communists. In contrast, it was in the Polish political interest to continue supporting “London Poland,” which reflected the hope of restoring the September 1, 1939, frontiers of the Polish state and of maintaining the alliance with Great Britain. From the Poles’ standpoint, the Soviet invaders and the German invaders were one and the same, and they were hardly differentiated in terms of the persecution and terror that they unleashed against the foundations and infrastructure of the Polish nationality.<sup>15</sup>

However, Jews could not engage in institutional political collaboration with the Soviet regime. The Jews in the eastern territories were not an influential national collective, let alone a social elite that, for lack of political choice, but with ideological ease, found itself under the heel of an occupation regime that granted it national autonomy or allowed it to express itself politically. In other words, the myth of Jewish collaboration is actually a reworking of traditional anti-Jewish myths that were rife in Polish society; it sprouted in soil that had been readied for this in the aftermath of the “twin occupations.” It was the Germans who planted the seeds of this havoc in 1939—by invoking policies that created a forced identity of interests between the Jews in the occupied territories and the power to the east.

## Polish Collaboration?

Tomasz Szarota, another important Polish historian of the World War II era, praised Gross’s book. He said that the exposure of events such as these in the nation’s past and the act of debating them show that Poland has shaken off its burden of prejudices and give salient evidence of the independence and normalization of Polish academic and public life. However, Szarota, like other historians, is not convinced that Gross left no documentary stone unturned

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<sup>15</sup> Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Żydzi i Polacy 1918–1955, Współistnienie - Zagłada - Komunizm* (Warsaw: S. K. Fronda, 2000), pp. 168ff.

before he unequivocally held the local population solely responsible for the slaughter in Jedwabne. Szarota argues that one cannot yet draw final conclusions about the Germans' role in the massacre.<sup>16</sup>

Other researchers doubt Gross's assertion that about half of the male population of Jedwabne took part in the murders. Gross's figures, they claim, are based on postwar studies by researchers with the Polish internal security police (UB) and may not be accurate.

The question of Polish-German collaboration in the murder of Jews remains at the forefront of the public debate about Jedwabne. Here, too, the collaboration theory is complicated and difficult to prove. German attempts to create a collaborationist apparatus in Poland failed and remained a marginal episode in the history of the occupation. In March 1939, the Germans attempted to interest Wincenty Witoś, the Peasants' Party leader (Stronnictwo Ludowe), who was in political exile in Czechoslovakia at the time, to conclude an agreement with them on future collaboration. Witoś promptly reported this to the Polish government. The Germans arrested Witoś in October 1939. They made another pathetic attempt in this direction by contacting a group of Polish intellectuals led by Stanisław Estreicher, a professor of law who served for some time as rector of Jagiellonian University in Kraków. This attempt also failed, and it was Estreicher's fate on November 6, 1939, to be deported along with other academicians and men of letters to Sachsenhausen, where he perished.

The Jedwabne debate is the most probing one that Polish society has undertaken in the post-Communist era concerning this society's attitude toward the Jews during the war and Poland's self-image as a victim of two murderous dictatorships—Hitler's and Stalin's. For centuries Poles have shaped their national memory on the basis of the myth, imbued with Catholic elements, that they are a victim-people. In World War II, Poland was attacked by two powers; it lost about 3,000,000 Poles in concentration camps and forced-labor camps in Poland and Germany and was thoroughly plundered and devastated in the years of the German and Soviet occupations. Poland,

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<sup>16</sup> Tomasz Szarota, "Czy na pewno już wszystko wiemy?" *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 2–3, 2000; also appeared in English as "Do We Know Everything for Certain?" in Brand, ed., *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, pp. 105-110.

the loyal ally of the West, the Nazis' opponent, had been abandoned to the two occupiers. How could this ultimate victim of cynicism and malevolence<sup>17</sup> be an agent of murderous persecution?

The difficulty of including Poles among the peoples that collaborated with the Nazis in genocide recurs when we examine the attributes of Polish Antisemitism. Polish national history and consciousness bear no memory of a pogromistic anti-Jewish movement. Acts of violence—sometimes severe—were committed against Jews before and after World War I, but, unlike the Russian and Ukrainian cases, they were not indicative of a politically significant mass movement. Furthermore, although violent incidents took place, a pogrom in which a murderously enflamed mob assailed and mauled Jews was foreign to the Polish identity—at least until the events in Kielce in 1946.

This last statement is based on the fact that Polish Antisemitism, even during the war, was not murderous in nature and did not speak in terms of outright liquidation except on its outermost fringes. It expressed extreme messages and unequivocal conclusions—the imperative of mass Jewish emigration from Poland—but did not advocate pogroms or genocide.<sup>18</sup> However, the anti-Jewish image persisted in the public national debate and in the resistance in occupied Poland. By 1939, the image of a Polish nation embroiled in grim struggle against the Jewish minority solidified in the Polish national consciousness—a struggle in which anti-Jewish rhetoric, images, and related associations took on the character of existential defense and adopted violence as its legitimate manifestation.<sup>19</sup>

This combination of anti-Jewish images and a strong consciousness of uncompromising struggle for national liberation led to the emergence of a phenomenon unique to Poland that did not exist in any other anti-Nazi resistance movement in occupied Europe. Only in Poland, as Aleksander Smolar said, could anti-Nazi underground resistance circles (on the political

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<sup>17</sup> This analysis and the emphasis that Poland's allies, for cynical reasons, had again abandoned her to powerful and pernicious political forces surfaced at the beginning of the occupation in the pages of the Polish underground press: *Polska Żyje! - Biuletyn Informacyjny*, no. 23, January 15, 1940.

<sup>18</sup> Andrzej Friszke, "Publicystyka Polski podziemnej wobec zagłady żydów 1939–1944," in Wojciech Wrzesiński, ed., *Polska - Polacy - mniejszości narodowe* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1992), pp. 210–211.

<sup>19</sup> In this matter, see Joanna Michlic-Coren's important article, "Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1918–1939 and 1945–1947," *Polin* 13 (2000), pp. 34–61.

right, of course) include Antisemitism, one of their enemy's basic principles, among their own principles. Only in Poland could such a resistance movement receive social legitimacy and have its worldview accepted as normative.<sup>20</sup>

In no way, however, can one equate the collaboration of Lithuanians, Ukrainians, or Latvians in murdering Jews in their respective countries with the collaboration of Poles in western Belorussia. While it is true that the Polish population took part in murdering its Jewish neighbors in two other towns in that area—in Radziłów and Wąsosz—to this day research has not managed to uncover solid evidence for the perpetration of similar actions elsewhere in Poland. Furthermore, it is difficult to define parameters that would typify the patterns of collaboration in these murderous instances. In Lithuania and the Ukraine, and certainly in other European countries, local populations were prompted to collaborate with the Germans in the expulsion and murder of Jews, including the “Final Solution,” out of political, economic, or national interests. It is difficult to find any of these factors in the Polish peasants' murderous onslaught against their Jewish neighbors in Jedwabne. Antisemitism as a main explanation is also unsatisfactory. One must acknowledge Antisemitism in order to understand the picture, but Antisemitism was not exclusive to the border towns in the Białystok District, where these events occurred in July 1941.

Gross, too, finds it difficult to offer a response or an explanation. He claims that one cannot possibly explain the murder spree in analytic terms. In the previous studies on which he bases his theoretical infrastructure as a social historian, he dealt with the special conditions in the occupied areas in Poland and their effect on the collapse of human behavioral standards. In 1939–1941, Polish society in the eastern occupied territories had to cope with totalitarian regimes that did not flinch from repression, terrorism, and liquidation of large population groups. These regimes fomented demoralization, obliterated the traditional cultural infrastructure, offended religious and moral values based on the Catholic heritage, and disrupted economic life. The traditional-minded rural population in these areas confronted a nihilistic reality with almost no stabilizing anchor. The occupation had pernicious corrupting and shattering

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<sup>20</sup> Aleksander Smolar, “Tabu i niewinność,” *Aneks*, 41-42 (1986), p. 99.

effects on the social organism and basic social solidarity. Polish society in Belorussia suffered more than the political damage of arrests, exiling, and execution of opponents and hostile elements. By 1941, when the Germans invaded after two years of Soviet rule, this society was in the throes of total value and moral disintegration. The events in Jedwabne cannot be understood or explained, it seems, without taking this reality into account.

## Image and Memory

Historians and researchers in other disciplines, clerics affiliated with the Church, politicians, and public figures are taking part in the current public debate in Poland about Jedwabne. After all, the debate concerns more than the research imperative of elucidating the facts and depicting the events as they really occurred; it also involves matters of national identity and memory. There is widespread concern, in Poland and elsewhere, about the harm that might be inflicted on the memory-shaping national image of Poland; people are worried about what will happen if the world's consciousness numbers the Poles among the peoples who took part in annihilating Jews in World War II. In their efforts to avert such an outcome, many critics have adopted strident tones of voice. Among other things, the debate has branched into collective criticism of the American Jews who ostensibly set the campaign in motion. These Jews, it is alleged, swiftly fault the Poles for their behavior during the Holocaust but say nothing about the Jewish police and their role in leading the Jews to their death. Antisemitic undertones have not been lacking as critics urge American Jewry to subject its activity on behalf of Holocaust victims to thorough examination before it so quickly points an accusing finger at others. The aftermath of these accusations is known, as one of the writers states: American Jewish organizations move in and demand public expiation; American Jewish lawyers demand compensation for the survivors; and American politicians demand unconditional support of Israel.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Remarks in this vein, reminiscent of Norman Finkelstein's nefarious rhetoric in his book, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso, 2000), were written by the British historian Norman Davies in his debate with several American researchers and authors. See Davies, "The Massacre at Jedwabne," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 13, 2001, p. 17.

Those who attempt to blame the murderous assault against the Jews in Jedwabne on the Jews' uninhibited support of the Soviet Union are obviously unaware of the antisemitic nature of their argument. Only an Antisemite would regard a Jewish Communist or a Jew who unfurled a red flag when the convoy of Soviet tanks rumbled into his town as representatives of the entire Jewish people. It is difficult to regard the behavior of these Jews, who acted within the complicated, complex, and perilous historical reality of the war era, as a collective national trait.

President Aleksander Kwaśniewski of Poland has courageously opposed the attempts to blur the Poles' responsibility for the massacre. He and others are steering Polish public opinion toward a painful and sincere confrontation with the Jedwabne affair and its implications for national memory, without expressing doubt about the need to investigate the events as thoroughly as possible. The journalist Konstanty Gebert states that Gross's book is as important for Poles as the many books that have been written on the Poles' suffering during the occupation and the crimes committed against them by the Nazis. Only in this way may the Polish nation be able to differentiate between injustices that it suffered and those that it inflicted on others. Only in this way may the Poles know whom they must forgive and who should forgive them.<sup>22</sup> These remarks represent the leading tone in the current public discourse in Poland on Jedwabne—a probing, straightforward, and unapologetic debate over the events and their repercussions.

The topic of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust is a raw nerve that even Jewish writers do not always treat with the sensitivity it deserves. In mid-March 2001, Adam Michnik, the editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, published an article in *The New York Times* in advance of the publication of the English edition of Gross's book. Michnik expressed his inner turmoil as a Polish Jew who has to face the challenge that the Jedwabne affair represents. He also urges Jews and Poles to take advantage of the Jedwabne events to open a new channel of dialogue, a channel informed by acceptance and

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<sup>22</sup> Dawid Warszawski (Gebert's pen name), "Odpowiedzialność i jej brak," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 9–10, 2000; also appeared in English as "Responsibility and the Lack of Responsibility," in Brand, ed., *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, pp. 131-140.



understanding of the Polish sense of guilt, on the one hand, and of the uniqueness of the Jewish tragedy, on the other.<sup>23</sup>

Leon Wieseltier, one of the most prominent American-Jewish intellectuals, responded by asserting (among other things) that, as a Pole and a Jew, Michnik should have reached the obvious conclusion that Poland has had some grand chapters in its past, but its history with regard to the Jews is not one of them.<sup>24</sup>

From the standpoint of history, this is erroneous. Indeed, Poland has had some glorious chapters in its past, including quite a few important chapters of tolerance and encouragement of coexistence with the Jews. It has also had some grim chapters, as have other peoples.

In 1987, Jan Błoński, the Polish literary scholar from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, published his article, "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto." This article has long been a landmark in the examination of Polish-Jewish relations. At the tail end of the Communist era in Poland, Błoński came out against all sorts of sacred cows in much of Polish society. He called for an examination of Polish society's attitudes toward the Jews during the Holocaust, a sincere confrontation with the issue, and the assumption of moral responsibility for what had happened on Polish soil. His remarks include:

Did this lead to participation in genocide? No, it did not. However, when one reads what was written about Jews before the war, when one discovers the amount of hatred rife in Poland, one cannot help wondering why words were not followed by deeds. In point of fact, they were not (or only in isolated cases). God restrained our hand. Yes, God, because if we did not take part in that crime it was because we were still Christians, because at the last moment we recognized the Devil's hand in this undertaking.<sup>25</sup>

At the time Błoński wrote his article, the Jedwabne episode had not yet worked itself into the Polish historical consciousness and the Polish national identity as a victim was still unsullied. Gross's book challenges this belief and this version of Polish national identity and asks Polish society a momentous

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<sup>23</sup> Adam Michnik, "Poles and the Jews: How Deep is the Guilt?" *The New York Times*, March 17, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Leon Wieseltier, "Righteous," *The New Republic*, April 9–16, 2001, p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> Jan Błoński, "Poor Poles Look at the Jews," *Yad Vashem Studies* (19) 1988, pp. 354-355.

question: did the Nazi genocidal bacterium that infected the Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Romanians, Hungarians, and Croats, and, to some extent, the French, too, infect us as well?

Gross's book forces historians – not only those who deal with Polish history or the question of Polish-Jewish relations—to tackle a series of questions and problems. It sharpens the need to explore painstakingly and cautiously the relationship between Antisemitism, totalitarianism, and disintegration of social order, on the one hand, and the annihilation of the Jewish people, on the other hand. It also requires Holocaust researchers to re-examine the murderer-victim-bystander model on which they have patterned their work for years. The case of Jedwabne has seriously blurred the borders among these categories.

Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood

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