

A Monument of Words*

Dariusz Stola

The web site of the Pogranicze Publishing House, which published Jan T. Gross's book *Neighbors*,¹ features an updated list of publications dealing with the crime in Jedwabne. The list features over 250 texts; this article may be the 274th, or even the 297th to be written on the topic. Obviously, even this impressive compendium does not include *all* relevant publications - not to mention the hundreds of comments and appearances on the radio, television, or Internet, as well as statements made at various meetings, seminars, etc. The discussion about Jedwabne has turned into the largest, most animated public debate about the Polish-Jewish past and World War II. It might even be that we are in the thick of the biggest historical debate in the Third Polish Republic.

The number of newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and other records of public pronouncements continues to swell, and keeps accumulating in thick files, similar to the file I myself have opened under "Jedwabne." Be that as it may, even before a monument of stone was erected on the outskirts of a town in the Podlasie region, a monument of words, a cairn made of newspapers had come into being.

What is the weight or meaning of a monument made of paper, someone may ask. Well, first of all, its advantage over a stone monument is that it speaks to many people. After half a century of oblivion, but within just a few months of debate in the mass media, nearly 80 percent of Poles, or more than 20 million people, have heard (as indicated by a recent poll) about the destruction of the Jews of Jedwabne. Second, it is precisely in the course of public debate that we shape and discover the meanings that later will be read from the material monument yet to be erected. Devoid of such meanings, monuments are just lumps of stone or metal. Third, a monument made of words is a collective

* The original Polish version of this article appeared in *Rzeczpospolita*, June 1, 2001, p. A9, and June 2-3, 2001, p. A6.

¹ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001); originally published in Polish: *Sąsiedzi: Historia Zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicze, 2000).

undertaking: it comes into being like a mound poured on handful by handful. And just like the social, collective effort involved in the process of its erection, it brings forth something else apart from the material consequence, something that takes place among people.

Some maintain that one should be wary of expressing an opinion on the issue of the crime in public, until the prosecutors and historians elucidate its circumstances. Well, this will never come to pass. The past is never explained completely, especially in such a murky case as mass murder. This also applies to the view that Gross's book came out prematurely, that such and such sources should have been checked, etc. This view is not unjustified, but no less sound is the argument that its publication was late in coming – about half a century late. History writing is a collective undertaking, which moves forward thanks to the uncovering of new sources and interpretations of the past, followed by criticism, positing alternative narratives, critiques of these narratives, and so on. Gross should be credited with setting this process in motion around the case, which is not only confounding and difficult, but of momentous importance as well. The fact that a Polish historian was involved is a source of satisfaction. It should also be noted that it was Gross who designated the main parameters of the ongoing debate, and even the most fervent of his critics abide by them – probably inadvertently.

A great many objections – some of them apparently warranted – have been raised against *Neighbors*, but they do not disqualify the book. By the same token, bringing up objections cannot be a reason for disqualification. As long as criticism does not exhibit bad faith and remains self-critical, it should be accepted with gratitude. In the playing field demarcated by the proven conventions and rules of historical methodology, we cooperate and serve the truth even when we debate and argue. And when we serve the truth we also serve Poland.

Those who claim that our homeland is served better by passing over in silence or misrepresenting “in defense of [our] good name” or “under the circumstances” are mistaken. Unfortunately, arguments are voiced in the present debate that can hardly be said to respect the proven convention or the rules of our profession. They are among a clamorous criticism, which makes a

pretense of credibility, while feeding on rumors; they present themselves as honest while resorting to invective; they pass themselves off as constructive but generate mostly informational noise. This noise calls to mind the clamor made, according to one eyewitness account, in Jedwabne by a couple of men who “walked from one Jewish dwelling to another together with other bandits playing accordion and flute to drown the screams of Jewish women and children.”²

All the perplexities and doubts notwithstanding, we do have in our possession a body of knowledge that, expressed with all due caution, appears incontrovertible. We know that on July 10, 1941, nearly all the Jedwabne Jews perished in indescribable agony; that Poles took part in the killing, that Germans played an important role in the crime, even though its exact nature remains to be elucidated. Equally likely are many facts that appear in individual testimonies. We do, therefore, have some grounds for reflection, which can contribute to the success of the collective effort of historians, as well as to the better understanding of the events by other readers. Cautious formulations - all those “probables” and “possibles” can be annoying, but they are better than offering the illusion of certitude whenever the sources leave room for divergent interpretations.

The Obvious Fact

I shall begin with a fact that many consider so obvious that they do not notice it anymore: on that day nearly all the Jews of Jedwabne, and only Jews, perished. The obviousness is grounded in our knowledge about later events, but also in a certain peculiar absence of puzzlement. From the perspective of our knowledge about the murder of nearly six million European Jews, including almost all Polish Jews, the crime in Jedwabne stands out because of the participation of Poles and the archaic killing methods, not because of its total scale. Yet, the intention to murder every single Jew within the reach of German rule largely determines the singularity of the Holocaust, setting it apart from earlier persecutions and violence committed against the Jews, or mass murders and acts of genocide committed in the twentieth century

² *Neighbors*, p. 16.

against other groups. This acquires even greater importance in the case of the crime in Jedwabne, since other distinct features of the Nazi “final solution of the Jewish question” – especially its modern, bureaucratic-industrial dimension – are absent.

The absence of puzzlement is aptly conveyed by an old joke about the rumor that railroad workers and Jews were to be put under arrest. “Why the railroad workers?” asks someone. “Why the Jews?” replies another.

First of all, then, of all the Jews who were in Jedwabne on the morning of July 10, 1941 – estimates range from several hundred (800?) to about 1,500 – only a handful lived to see the evening. We do not know how many managed to elude the jaws of death that day. We know about the seven who were hidden by the Wyrzykowski family, but there were also others, possibly a hundred people, who found good shelters in town and beyond, at least for the time being. In any event, the number of survivors amounted to a small fraction of those condemned to slaughter – from a few to twenty percent at the most.

I do not think that this outcome of the events of that day can be construed as an accumulated effect of an uncoordinated “cacophony of violence,”³ the result of the internal dynamics of mounting aggression of the mob. This is true even assuming that the social dynamics of such a process was fueled by such powerful incendiaries as ancient ethnic and religious prejudices, inter-group hatred, unbridled greed, or desire for revenge. Instead, it seems that the killing of all or nearly all the Jews was the goal of the murderers’ actions (at least from a certain moment on), and that these actions proved unusually efficient – anywhere between 85 percent and 95 percent efficient.

I do not recall any ethnic disturbances, or attacks by “dark swarms” of peasants where violence proved so efficient, considering such a large number of victims. The wave of pogroms that swept over the Ukraine in 1918-1919, offers a suitable comparison. The contributing factors of the crime, which seem to have been operative in the case of Jedwabne – ethnic resentment, the stereotype of “Jewish Bolsheviks,” and greed – were not less strongly felt or widespread in Ukraine in 1919 than in the Podlasie region in 1941. A detailed analysis of the data relating to some 1,300 pogroms recorded for the

³ *Neighbors*, p. 94.

Ukraine indicates that 80 percent of Jewish families survived without casualties. Up to ten persons perished in 36 percent of the pogroms, whereas less than 100 persons lost their lives in 88 percent of the pogroms. In any case, nowhere did the ratio of those killed to survivors approximate the equivalent ratio in Jedwabne.⁴ Similarly, the first pogroms in Kovno and Lvov, which took place in the aftermath of the Soviet flight in the summer of 1941 – that is almost concurrently with the events in Jedwabne – resulted in several thousand casualties. However, these amounted to a small fraction of the total Jewish population of these cities. The crime in Jedwabne was not an extraordinarily brutal pogrom; its totality turned it into something essentially new.

I do not claim that there was no “cacophony of violence” in Jedwabne yet one cannot reduce the events of July 10 to such a dimension. I consider this kind of violence just one of the means of realization of the total goal. It is possible that some of the perpetrators, driven by the so human emotions as desire for revenge or by greed for spoils, sought to inflict death or harm on a specific person or persons, but there must have also been others who saw total annihilation as their goal. Furthermore, it was they who made the final outcome a foregone conclusion, turning others into participants in something they might not quite understand – at least until a certain moment.

Second, the totality of the murder in Jedwabne was equal to its selectivity. No testimony offers evidence of non-Jewish victims among those murdered in the town’s streets or in Bronisław Sleszynski’s barn. If, as some maintain, the murderers were motivated, among other reasons, by the desire for revenge against recent collaborators with the Soviet occupier, the question arises why there were no non-Jewish collaborators among those forced to carry Lenin’s statue or among the victims being chased into the barn? After all, there was no shortage of such collaborators, and, besides, it seem that they should have been more legitimate targets of reprisals than Jewish children.

Bloody though selective acts of reprisal did take place earlier, immediately after the Russians had fled. According to Karol Bardoń’s testimony, their targets included “Kupiecki, former volunteer of the Soviet militia ...,

⁴ Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 119.

Wiśniewski, former chairman of the village soviet ..., Wiśniewski, secretary of the soviet ..., three people of Mosaic faith... [and also] two others I didn't recognize" – that is Jews as well as non-Jews.⁵ This was the time of settling scores for the period of Soviet occupation (about which more below), described extensively by Professor Tomasz Strzembosz. In all likelihood, incidents of personal settling of accounts and of venting old hatreds did take place, as did, above all, acts of despoilment plain and simple, which came in the wake of the breakdown of public order due to a temporary absence of a government. In the events of July 10, the desire for revenge clearly played an indirect role in the murderers' motives, filtered through layers of prejudice and hatred of Jews in general. Even the assumption that they were acting on the principle of collective responsibility does not provide adequate explanation. After all, they could have applied this principle also to the families of Polish collaborators, their brothers and fathers. However, they killed only Jews, including wives and children of persons who by no account could be accused of having collaborated with the Soviets.

The Pattern of Killing

The remarkable efficiency of the murderers indicates the organized nature of the crime. Had the excited mob launched a chaotic attack on Jewish houses and stores, the result would have resembled the brutal though limited incidents, such as the pogroms in the Ukraine mentioned earlier. As a rule they ended with several, perhaps more than a dozen, killed and several dozen wounded and, above all, extensive looting and vandalism.

The organized and planned nature of the anti-Jewish action on July 10 is attested to by various facts known from testimonies. We know about a meeting between a group of Germans who had arrived in town and the town authorities during which the plan of action was formed, or perhaps just some of the details worked out. The fact that some of the survivors had been warned by their Polish friends and that farmers from the neighboring villages showed up in town in the morning is a possible indication that some preparations had been made earlier. We also know that members of the

⁵ *Neighbors*, p. 56.

municipal administration, usually together with German gendarmes, visited houses of Polish residents and ordered the men to go to a designated location; that sticks and clubs (which someone must have prepared and stockpiled earlier) were handed out to those assembled. Specific assignments were given, such as driving the Jews to the market square, guarding the streets leading out of town and keeping watch over the Jews assembled at the market square. We also know that people mounted on horses patrolled the outskirts of the town in order to round up escapees, which seems another telltale sign of an assigned task. Later on the Poles recruited for the operation were instructed to escort the Jews from the market square to the barn outside the town. Witnesses, as well as persons accused of taking part in the murder, spoke about these instructions. It is possible that they were also given other assignments to which they did not want to admit after the war.

Method and deliberateness are in evidence in the killing operation on the cemetery grounds: Jewish men were marched to the cemetery and ordered to dig a pit into which the murdered victims were thrown. They were brought to the cemetery not singly but in groups, which gave the advantage to the executioners over their victims on the killing site, as the former could easily suppress any resistance attempts by the latter. The pattern of killing – able-bodied men were the first to be slaughtered – was meant to avoid the possibility of resistance out of despair in the next stage, when the multitude of the remaining beaten and terrorized Jews (mostly women, old people, and children) was driven to the barn. The apparently small scale of looting on that day also attests to organization and discipline of sorts. While we know the property of the murdered victims was appropriated later on, this topic seems to be absent from the fragments of sources on July 10 with which I am familiar.

Thus, the collective action manifests some order: there was a goal, a division of labor, and a plan of action, even though it was modified at certain stages; for example, initially the Jews were to be marched to another barn. Individual witnesses, whose testimonies provide the basis for our knowledge about the events, could see only a sequence of terrible scenes, especially if they observed them from the victims' perspective. They were surprised and shaken

by the horrifying events, and their testimonies revolve around the two aspects that they experienced as the most shocking: the savagery; and the participation of their neighbors in the crime. In contrast, they mention the organizing activities only in passing. The participants who could have known the plan of action, or have seen the overall picture (Bardoń, for example), had good reasons not to divulge this knowledge, especially since after the war no one seems to have asked them about it.

Obviously, the pattern of action in Jedwabne differed from that of mass executions carried out by German police units alone. Here the pattern or order was more of a general nature. It served as a framework, so to speak, which left much room for individual initiatives and loosely coordinated actions by individuals and small groups of excited executioners, who gave vent to personal hatreds or settling of scores. At the same time, however, individual initiatives had their limits: for example, no exception could be made for any of the victims; one's post could not be abandoned; one had to (temporarily) refrain from looting, and so on. In some cases these rules were violated, but these violations stand out precisely as an exception to the rule.

The Division of Labor

What I believe especially important is that this pattern introduced a particular division of labor, with roles marked by different degrees of involvement in the killing. At the top, were the direct murderers who wielded iron tools or wooden clubs. At the end of the day, one of them allegedly cast a lit match at the barn, which was doused in kerosene. It was this image of such "willing executioners" (a term coined by Daniel Goldhagen), feverishly active ("Jerzy Ludański, ...was running down the street, ... he was very nervous"⁶) and mobile, that etched itself in the memories of the surviving victims and those witnesses who were willing to talk. It appears the perpetrators were in a state of elation, acting within "holy time" rather than "ordinary time." This sets them apart from German functionaries, who applied themselves to their duties in a businesslike fashion – a fact known from other massacres.

⁶ *Neighbors*, p. 97.

The “willing executioners” from Jedwabne are portrayed in many testimonies with sufficient clarity as to leave no doubt as to the existence of this group, even though its size and composition remain unclear. The group also included volunteers who were not conscripted to the anti-Jewish action. Allegedly, many arrivals from the neighboring localities were among them.

“Standing on the market square” was at the bottom of the list of the roles in the division of labor, the only one to which the accused in the 1949 trial were willing to confess. In contrast to the bloody deeds of the executioners, it did not entail falling into moral savagery or hating the victims. It seems that general obedience to the authorities and fear of punishment for refraining from carrying out their orders was sufficient for them to assume this role.

The duties entailed by an intermediate position in the division of labor involved tasks with increasing degrees of violence, such as removing the Jews from their houses, rounding up those trying to escape, etc. It should be noted that the tasks that did not involve use of violence were necessary for the realization of the plan to murder the Jews, even though they were secondary and attract less attention. The same applies to other activities that furthered or facilitated the attainment of the designated goal – although in a different context they would have been innocent – for example, taking the kerosene from the storage room, opening the barn and removing unnecessary items from it, etc.

It appears that the number of people performing specific duties was in inverse proportion to the degree of direct involvement in the killing. Carrying out the task did not require a large number of “willing executioners.” In fact, they could be few in number thanks precisely, among other things, to the division of labor or specialization of tasks, which relieved the experts from activities that others could perform. Similarly, they did not have to be large in number, since the presence of armed Germans behind their backs convinced the victims that resistance was futile (how else can we explain the absence of resistance?). Even their cruelty turns out to be instrumental, since the spread of terror paralyzed the will of the victims, diminished the risk of undesirable behavior, and therefore reduced the means and resources needed to carry out the task. All this does not mean that all these elements were planned in advance;

however, without their presence, the course of events could have been different. After all, when launching the action on July 10, the Germans and Mayor Marian Karolak operated in conditions of considerable uncertainty.

As for one of the main issues in the debate between Gross and Strzembosz, namely, the number of Poles who took part in the operation, the number twenty-three given by Strzembosz seems to apply only to the particularly active participants. Besides, it leaves out the perpetrators from outside of Jedwabne. Such a low estimate obviously runs counter to the repeated statements in testimonies about “masses of people,” a “packed crowd” that surrounded the Jews. Still, the number of at least ninety-two perpetrators from Jedwabne alone, as estimated by Gross, was calculated in a manner that raises reasonable doubt. The fact that as many names appear in the protocols of the UB (Security Service) interrogations is testimony to the efficiency of the interrogators (as well as their methods), who proceeded routinely, i.e. they sought to secure confessions and statements incriminating as many other persons as possible. Incidentally, the fact that those interrogated often mentioned deceased or missing persons indicates that they were aware of the rules of the game.

It appears that the diverging estimates offered by the two historians of the number of participants from Jedwabne can largely be explained by their different approach to the persons who performed auxiliary duties, with low involvement in the direct killings. Strzembosz clearly leaves such persons out of his account, whereas Gross lumps them together with “the willing executioners.”

The number of participants assumes particular importance regarding the question of the degree to which they can be said to represent the entire Polish population of Jedwabne. The higher among the two estimates, approximating nearly half the number of all adult males⁷ allows extrapolation from their behavior to the population as a whole. But then the question arises: which behavior is under discussion? In this context we should note that the higher the estimate, the larger the number of persons who performed secondary, auxiliary tasks, did so unwillingly and under duress, or even abandoned their

⁷ *Neighbors*, p. 87.

posts at the first opportunity (as testified by some of the defendants in the trial). On the other hand, when we turn to the deeds of the “willing executioners,” we speak of a group (perhaps smaller) that included volunteers from outside Jedwabne. In this case we lack the grounds to draw generalized conclusions about the Polish population of the town from their behavior.

Furthermore, the group of the “willing executioners” cannot be treated as a random sample. It clearly was not formed randomly, but through selection, and therefore could not be representative. In all likelihood, when carrying out the conscription (which did not sweep all the men in town) and handing out assignments prior to the operation, Karolak took into account the personality traits of the town residents with whom he was familiar. More important, later on self-selection took place: various individuals joined or left the group of executioners by taking on or shirking assignments, by showing particular eagerness in carrying them out, or even by volunteering to beat up or kill the Jews. These were not “ordinary men,” such as the Germans described by Christopher Browning, who were *drafted* to Reserve Police Battalion 101 and murdered the Jews in Józefów.⁸

We know that some Poles refused to accept any assignment and fled the town, or hid in their houses. This indicates that passive resistance of this kind – refusal to take part in the operation – was (seen by them to be) risky but possible. We also know about persons who helped the Jews escape or hide; in other words, they actively resisted the operation. However, these acts of passive and active resistance were carried out in secrecy. We know of no instance of an open, blatant act of resistance. Obviously, fear was at least one reason for this. Equally obvious, it seems, is that not only the Germans were feared, but also, perhaps foremost, some of one’s Polish neighbors. The cruelty of the “willing executioners” and Karolak’s rule evoked fear not only among the Jewish victims.

The last category in our typology of behaviors consists of onlookers who, acting clearly on their own initiative, without any instructions, surrounded the Jews assembled at the market square and, later, in the vicinity of the barn. In

⁸ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). Browning’s outstanding book can be recommended to everyone moved by the story of Jedwabne.

all likelihood they made up the largest group of Poles who were present during the crime. At the same time, their silent passivity makes them the most opaque of all the groups. Both the villains and the persons who actively evaded taking part in the operation, as well as those who extended assistance to the Jews, showed compassion with words, or who expressed satisfaction at their suffering expressed themselves in a revealing way. In contrast, members of the group whose attitudes can be gauged only from their silence resist our inquiries.

We can only guess that the victims regarded this crowd of onlookers as hostile, which arguably affected their assessment of their chances of escape or resistance, for example. The victims had good reasons for this assessment: adverse behaviors and statements toward the Jews were clearly visible and manifest because they were officially sanctioned and encouraged, and a sufficient number of Poles showed their willingness to engage in such behavior or make hostile remarks. In contrast, behavior or remarks sympathizing with the victims were not visible and offered in secret, because of the official ban and the perceived risk. Incidentally, in the opinion of this author, the conditions under which the Poles perceived Jewish attitudes under the Soviet occupation were similar, as were the generalized conclusions drawn by the Poles on this basis.

Last but not least, we should focus on the managerial functions, on people who managed the anti-Jewish action in Jedwabne. Mayor Marian Karolak played the key role, followed by Bardoń and members of the town administration, Józef Sobuta and Wasilewski. Although they did not necessarily stain their hands with blood, within the perspective of this study, their role appears critical.

Unfortunately, although witnesses emphasize the significance of these three in the events, we have little knowledge of how they performed their leading duties. This question is crucial. This is the question of leadership, without which collective actions are easily distracted or run aground. Why did the participants carry out Karolak's instructions? Why, for example, didn't all of them scatter in search of easy spoils (especially if we assume that greed motives played a considerable part in their actions, and the first to get to the

booty stood to gain the most)? On what was his rule founded? What were its sources? Who was Karolak himself? I don't have satisfactory answers to these questions. I pose them because, as I was taught in the university, a good question is half an answer.

The Role of the Germans

When considering the issues of leadership and organization of the murder in Jedwabne, we inevitably run into questions about the role of the Germans. Germans make their appearance in Jedwabne not only as members of a certain ethnic group, but also in specific roles. These are important not only in the higher, historical-metaphysical sense, but also in the most practical meaning of the term.⁹

Unfortunately, Polish and Jewish witnesses have relatively little to say about the Germans' specific actions on July 10.¹⁰ We do not even know with any certainty how many of them were present; in testimonies they usually appear as faceless and nameless figures in uniforms. Testimonies speak about their meeting with the town administration, their participation in conscripting Polish men for guarding the Jews (including coercion and "threats with firearms"), participation in driving the Jews to the market square, beating and chasing them to the barn, and photographing (or filming) the events.

Certain aspects of the events in question allow us to surmise about their actions in several moments of crucial importance in terms of organization. In contrast to the participation in conscription of Poles and beatings of Jews, these activities were hidden from the witnesses' eyes, or simply inconspicuous, especially against the background of the shocking scenes of violence and savagery.

First, I assume that the plan to murder *all* the Jews was not conceived locally, but imported. Obviously, we cannot rule out that such an idea was conceived independently by Karolak or Sobuta. However, the fact that its appearance coincided with the onset of similar actions by the German authorities in other

⁹ *Neighbors*, p. 78.

¹⁰ An even more vexing lacuna is created by the absence of relevant German archival sources. So far no German sources relating to Jedwabne have come to light. It is ironic that a feverish search is going on for German testimonies in the context of the controversy about the Polish-Jewish past. The executioners are to arbitrate their victims.

localities, in conjunction with the fact that a mysterious group of Gestapo men arrived in Jedwabne, looks like more than sheer coincidence. Yet, matters are not as simple as they appear, since the murder in Jedwabne was precursory in its totality (about which below).

Second, we should keep in mind that the crime was committed as late as eighteen days after the flight of the Soviets and the bloody settling of scores with collaborators, mentioned above. This timing, together with the fact that on that day a mysterious group of Germans arrived in town, raises doubts as to whether the killing was a spontaneous initiative of the town's residents, stemming from their desire for revenge for the actual or imaginary collaboration of Jews with the Soviets. This possibility cannot be ruled out, but it is less likely than the presumption that the inspiration came from outside. This author finds it hard to believe that the Jedwabne municipal administration made a request to the German authorities to agree to the murder of the Jews and to send a special group of Gestapo men, with photographic equipment, for the occasion. We should note in this context that no one instigated Polish participants to act, or inflamed their hatred, for example, by delivering speeches on Jewish treason, the need to avenge wrongs, etc.

Third, the meeting between the Germans and the municipal administration, which turned out to be critical for the course of events, amounted to a briefing rather than a consultation. After all, the town council was appointed by the occupation authorities (though the circumstances surrounding its establishment remain unclear) and remained totally subordinated to it, so that no partnership of any sort between the two sides was possible. The claim that the municipal administration "signed some agreement"¹¹ with the Germans is a misunderstanding. This, however, does not change the fact – attested to in numerous testimonies – that the commitment shown by members of the administration in carrying out the anti-Jewish action exceeded the bounds of ordinary obedience.

Fourth, the significantly high effectiveness of this action testifies to the considerable organizational skills of those who headed it. Again, it cannot be ruled out that the natural skills of Karolak and Bardoń were responsible (we do

¹¹ *Neighbors*, p. 75.

not have any information that they had performed any managerial tasks before the war), but it is not less likely that it resulted from police experience and education, as well as clever planning and skillful supervision of German officers.

It is, perhaps, worth asking what the Germans did not do in Jedwabne. Arguments *ex silentio* have their drawbacks, but we would be hard put to ignore a puzzling fact. In the available sources we encounter numerous and reliable – some of them more, some less detailed – accounts of acts of homicide committed on July 10, by Poles. I have not, however, encountered any description – not even a reference – to a murder committed on that day by a German. When witnesses in the 1949 trial recanted their testimonies, which they claimed had been given under duress during their interrogation and which incriminated some Jedwabne Poles, they failed to provide any alternative explanations of the circumstances surrounding the death of so many Jews on the town's streets and at the cemetery.¹²

Furthermore, a recurring detail in all the testimonies about the liquidations of Jewish communities in occupied Poland is missing: the sound of shots being fired. The silence amidst which people who worked in the fields outside the town heard the victims' screams is remarkable; no one writes about shots being fired. Were no shots fired then, or were they so few and far between that they etched themselves in no one's memory? We have to keep in mind in this context that at least several dozen people were killed outside the barn. This silence indicates that the victims were not killed with firearms, as was the case with mass murders committed by German Einsatzgruppen at the time in dozens of small towns in the East. They were done in by means of other implements and, therefore, in all likelihood, not at the hands of German policemen.

Vanguard and Exception?

Keeping in mind the pioneer nature of the crime in Jedwabne, we should dwell a bit on the chronology of the Holocaust. From the beginning of the German-

¹² I owe this observation to Krzysztof Persak, whom I would like to thank here for his critical remarks about this article.

Soviet war, the Einsatzgruppen carried out a large number of executions of civilians, killing several tens of thousands of people, mostly Jews, in July alone. The victims, however, were mostly adult males, not whole communities, including women and children.

Historians have long been debating the question of the timing of the decision about the “final solution” through total extermination: extermination to be carried out right away, not in an indefinite future. The most convincing seems to be the opinion that, even though from the beginning of the invasion, the Einsatzgruppen commanders knew that their final goal was the complete annihilation of the Jews, the practical decisions that enabled the realization of this goal were made in the middle of July. This is borne out by the fact that, in the second half of July, the Einsatzgruppen troops were reinforced by additional units of the SS and the police, which increased their strength several times; until then their manpower had been too small (some 3,000 men) to carry out the executions of hundreds of thousands of victims.¹³

The Jedwabne murders, together with a similar crime in neighboring Radziłów, about which we know even less, was one of the early instances, if not the earliest, of an almost *complete* annihilation of an entire community. It cannot be ruled out (though I doubt it) that this plan originated with Karolak or Sobuta (in which case it can be considered as their remarkable contribution not only to the town’s history but also to the history of the world). Even limited to the scale of Jedwabne, the plan of total murder was a novelty in the true sense of this term. As far as I know, such an idea had not appeared in the pre-war antisemitic writings in Poland. Although the rhetoric of Polish antisemites was often eliminatory in nature, they saw emigration of a considerable proportion of Polish Jews as the “final solution”.¹⁴ After all, the path from a dangerous metaphor to the realization of mass murder takes some time, as exemplified by the long road traveled by the most fiery Nazi

¹³ Christopher R. Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also Tomasz Szarota, *U progu Zagłady. Zajścia antyżydowskie i pogromy w okupowanej Europie: Warszawa, Paryż, Amsterdam, Antwerpia, Kowno* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2000), pp. 209-216; Christian Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference. The Fate of German Jews and Hitler’s Decision in Principle to Exterminate all European Jews,” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 70, no. 4 (1998), pp. 759-812.

¹⁴ Anna Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu. Koncepcje rozwiązania kwestii żydowskiej w publicystyce polskiej lat 1933-1939* (Warsaw: Neriton, 1998).

antisemites. Even the Nazi leaders, whose rhetoric had long since made their audience accustomed to an eliminatory and ruthless approach to the Jews, reached the decision about total killing step by step, beginning with the early stages of discrimination, forced emigration, and later ghettoization, destruction through starvation and disease, and various plans for “reservations” and resettlement, which radicalized as the war wore on.¹⁵

Assuming that the idea to exterminate all the Jews of Jedwabne predated the decisions taken at the Germany’s highest levels to expand mass executions to whole communities and did not originate with Karolak, then its sources must be sought in the initiative of the mysterious Germans “in a taxi.” They could have arrived in Jedwabne (and Radziłów) already with this purpose in mind. It is also possible that it took shape only after their arrival, or even in the course of the operation (once all the Jews had been assembled on the market square the task was largely accomplished). Sufficient grounds for such an initiative were provided by the guidelines of their commanders (and leaders), which spoke about a total, ideological and racial nature of the war against “Jewish bolshevism”; about involving the local population in “self-cleansing” actions; and little-known guidelines concerning the treatment of Jews in particular.

We should also keep in mind in this context that the Third Reich legally sanctioned crimes in the conquered territory. In his report of October 1941, Walter Stahlecker, commander of Einsatzgruppe A, mentioned how the local population was secretly inspired to carry out pogroms, yet he believed that “the Jewish problem in the East could not be solved by pogroms alone.” In accordance with basic orders, his unit’s objective was the “maximum elimination of the Jews.”¹⁶

Such guidelines were sufficient, for example, for the murder of more than 2,000 Jews in Bialystok on June 27 (among others, several hundred were burned to death in a synagogue), and at least 3,000 more two weeks later. In this light, the crime in Jedwabne appears as a successful attempt to

¹⁵ On the debate between “functionalists” and “intentionalists,” see Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Excerpts from the report were published by Szarota, *U proggu*, pp. 289-294. See also Yitzhak Arad, et al., eds., *Documents on the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1981), pp. 389-393.

implement the guidelines mentioned above; here, thanks to the mobilization of the local population one could overcome the barrier of the initial inadequacy of the German police forces' manpower achieve to their long-term goals.

The question arises, however, why did Jedwabne and Radziłów remain an exception? Why did the Holocaust take a different course in hundreds of other localities with mixed Polish-Jewish populations? I believe that the case of Jedwabne and environs was truly exceptional, which is precisely why the existence of this crime remained hidden from the public and historians – and not only Polish historians. Arguably, had there been many similar incidents, they would have been made public earlier – if not by Poles, then by persons for whom facts of this sort would fit well with their image of Polish attitudes to the Jews. I do not claim that in other places Polish attitudes were exemplary. Various sources indicate that in many localities acts of violence and looting took place, that individuals and small groups of local Poles aided the Germans in the persecution of the Jews, but we do not encounter any information about crime and collaboration comparable in their scope to those in Jedwabne.

How did Jedwabne and its environs differ from the rest of Poland? What was special about the place or its people – if we discount the noxious influence of the miasma given off by the neighboring Biebrza swamps?

I see several factors, which (partially) explain this particular geographic concentration, and all of them can be compressed into one statement: the area under consideration had been an ethnically Polish, or rather Polish-Jewish, sector of Soviet zone of occupation. Here it should be noted that anti-Jewish prejudice and resentment, so visible before the war, does not provide a satisfactory explanation. Such prejudice and sentiments were in evidence in many other Polish areas, and even though anti-Jewish nationalists exercised strong influence in the Łomża region, this was not exceptional compared to other areas, that they dominated. This factor arguably amounted to a necessary, but by no means sufficient, condition for the Jedwabne tragedy to take place.

Let us begin with the areas west of Jedwabne. In the *Generalgouvernement* and the areas incorporated into the Reich, Germans could at no time appear as liberators at any moment. For their part the Germans held the Poles too

much in contempt and feared them too greatly to encourage them to engage in organized collaboration. They quickly cooled the ardor of the handful of incorrigible Germanophiles; whereas the river of Polish blood they were fast to spill conclusively set them against the rest of the population and frustrated their later attempts to involve the Poles in actions against the Soviets. The history of the German occupation is encumbered with the problem – still awaiting thorough research – of individuals rendering services to Germans, of scattered cases of collaboration (including persecution of Jews) by certain persons, of “private” preying on Jewish tragedy and defenselessness (the *szmalcownicks* - extortionists), as well as the whole “gray zone” of accommodation to the conditions of occupation. On the other hand, we are not burdened with the problem – which still vexes the Ukrainians or the French – of collaboration of Polish organizations or leaders. Any Pole who collaborated with the Germans, including collaboration in persecuting Jews, could not claim to act on anybody’s behalf except his own.¹⁷

Polish underground resistance came into being and operated under German occupation, in contrast to the areas under Soviet rule, where such attempts were crushed with greater thoroughness, as exemplified also in Jedwabne. It was Jan Gross himself who had drawn our attention to the importance of the normative efforts of the underground leadership aimed at showing ordinary people what one should or should not do under the new, exceptional conditions of occupation. Polish underground authorities, as well as the Polish Government-in-exile in London – which consisted, among others, of parties far from being philosemitic – on several occasions issued warnings against collaboration with the occupier in anti-Jewish actions. Actual instances of such collaboration were denounced and, later on punished.

Just two weeks prior to the events in Jedwabne, an instruction was dispatched to the country that “the government emphatically stresses the need to warn the population not to heed German incitement to take active steps against the Jews in areas freed from the Soviet occupation.” Four months earlier the underground *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, the most important periodical of the Polish underground, reminded its readers “to refrain from any [forms of]

¹⁷Such cases are described by Szarota; *ibid*. The appraisal of the Polish “blue” police is still controversial.

collaboration, even appearances of such, in anti-Jewish action organized by the Germans.”¹⁸ The scope of the phenomenon of illegal listening to radio broadcasts and reading the underground press, which provides some indication of their authority, requires that such voices be taken into account when discussing mass behavior under occupation.

The situation in areas under Soviet rule was different, and its consequences were to be felt especially in the first period after the German attack on June 22, 1941. The exceptional nature of this period should be stressed, because later on factors similar to those in the *Generalgouvernement* entered into play; most particularly, the persecution of Poles and the expansion of the underground. The impact of the Soviet occupation is crucial for any explanation of events in Jedwabne. This is not only, nor even primarily, because of collaboration of the Jews - neither the factual (which cannot be doubted) nor the imaginary and mythologized (which cannot be doubted either).

The Soviet occupation is a more complex factor, which requires our attention above all because of the horror it was. It was a terrible time for all ethnic groups living in the annexed territory, for the Poles in particular. It was only in this context that German invaders could have initially appeared as liberators in the summer of 1941. Almost two years of Soviet rule had implanted in many people a deep fear, a sense of chaos and of the cruelty of the world. Such traumatic experiences sow seeds in human souls, which later sprout most strange thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Furthermore, these years seriously undermined the social order, shaking it to its foundations, weakened respect for norms, and stifled the voice of conscience. They schooled people in obedience, but also instilled in them egoism and ruthlessness and taught them how to use the powerful and cruel state apparatus to settle personal scores (by informing, for example). Denizens of more fortunate countries and eras would be hard put to understand the experience of living through two consecutive totalitarian regimes.

¹⁸ “Instrukcja nr 2” of June 23, 1941, and *Biuletyn Informacyjny* of March 6, 1941, see Dariusz Stola, *Nadzieja i Zagłada: Ignacy Schwarzbart - żydowski przedstawiciel w Radzie Narodowej RP (1940-1945)* (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 1995), p. 120.

In order to gain a proper perspective on the issue of the participation of Poles in German anti-Jewish actions in the areas of Soviet occupation, we should distinguish between ethnically Polish regions, or, to be more exact, Polish-Jewish ones, on the one hand, and on the other hand those with a prominent presence of other nationalities, particularly those where Lithuanian and Ukrainian national movements made themselves felt. Ukrainian and Lithuanian nationalists were quick to establish armed organizations, and they greeted the Germans not only as liberators from the Soviet yoke, but also as allies in the anticipated (re)construction of their respective states – which the Germans skillfully exploited to their own ends. It was these groups who joined in or led, murder actions against the Jews, sometimes on a large scale. The Poles looked on, often fearfully, recalling anti-Polish attitudes of the nationalist factions of their erstwhile minorities and regarding themselves as the next potential victims.

The considerable involvement of Balts and Ukrainians, which continued in the years that followed, in the realization of the “final solution” cannot be explained by their higher level of antisemitic prejudice and resentment (no matter how measured). It would be difficult to indicate any significant differences between a Polish Catholic peasant and his Lithuanian counterpart in terms of attitudes or prejudices against the Jews before the war. Independent Lithuania, for example, especially in the first years of its existence, seemed to be more favorably disposed toward the Jews than was Poland. What seems to make a difference between these groups during the war was a political factor – leaders tending toward cooperation with the Germans, and the German intention to take advantage of this orientation.

Having dealt with the areas of German occupation and the ethnically mixed eastern lands, we are left with the areas to which the above explanations of Jedwabne’s singularity do not apply, where political and ethnic conditions were similar to those in Jedwabne. In several small towns in the Bialystok region, we encounter a general similarity of conditions and events that parallel almost exactly certain parts of the Jedwabne history. There is one crucial difference, however – no slaughter with organized Polish participation took place in those localities.

“Funerals” of statutes of Lenin, almost identical to what took place in Jedwabne, occurred almost at the same time in Brańsk (its Polish mayor, appointed by the Germans, “hated the Jews” in the words of a local historian, and “this fact possibly determined his appointment”), as well as in Czyżew and Kolno.¹⁹ But why was the Jedwabne scenario not repeated in these localities? Was the hatred of Jews less intense? Was the hatred of the Germans greater there? Was it because the Germans did not give the order? Perhaps the local elite had different orientations, or perhaps such an elite survived the Soviet occupation, endured, and was able somehow to counterbalance the influence of individuals such as Karolak? I have no answers to these questions; perhaps someone else knows them, or will provide them in the future.

The Jedwabne State

The scenario I have outlined here leads to a different conclusion than that posited by Jan Gross. He wrote: “The 1,600 Jedwabne Jews were killed neither by the NKVD, nor by the Nazis, nor by the Stalinist secret police, it was their neighbors who killed them.”²⁰ Although this statement was prompted by the contents of the inscription on the monument in Jedwabne, signed “society,” and provides a bitter, ironic commentary on the attempt to externalize the evil on the NKVD, the Nazis and the secret police, it does dovetail with a certain tendency made manifest in other sections of the book. I have in mind here not as much juxtaposing the Germans with the Poles, as the opposition between “society” and “rulers,” the pair of concepts that dominate our thinking about totalitarian regimes. Gross has long since been advancing a new perspective on the practices of totalitarian regimes; his book *Revolution from Abroad*²¹ offers an excellent example of this approach.

This view is close to my heart, because, as within the micro-historical perspective it shows the human face(s) of the system (which does not make it less frightening), restores agency to individuals who are enmeshed in the operations of a totalitarian state. In the classical theory of totalitarianism, such

¹⁹ Z. Romaniuk, ed., *Ziemia brańska* (Brańsk: Tow. Przyjaciół Brańska, 1995), vol. 6, p. 118.

²⁰ *Neighbors*, p. 170.

²¹ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Revolution from Abroad. The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

individuals are usually portrayed just as little cogs of bureaucratic machinery or inert particles of the human mass, prompted to act by a mixture of indoctrination and fear. My impression, however, is that this time Gross went too far in “de-etatizing” the course of events under discussion, or chose an example whose weak, often obscure source base makes room for divergent interpretations.

Apart from “spontaneous reflexes and behavior” of some Poles from Jedwabne and its environs, I notice a certain order or framework without which matters would have taken a different course. In the absence of this framework, gruesome and ignominious deeds could have taken place, but they would have belonged to a category different from genocide. This framework emanates from the state; one could even say that it is the state.

In the events of July 10, a very peculiar, truly grotesque, state made its appearance: the territorially miniscule state of Jedwabne, existing by the will of the occupier and (co)administered by its local collaborators. It cannot be seen as a form of social self-organization, a product of civil society. It should be noted, however, that legitimacy of the collaborators’ rule rests on more than the will of the powerful Germans. It is also rooted in the feeling of relief at the end of Soviet occupation, thanks to which the new occupier could be seen as a liberator. Some could have found this state easier to accept because it was anti-Jewish.

This mini-state had its own hierarchy and chain of command, with the Germans at the top, followed by Karolak, Sobuta, Bardoń, Jerzy Ludański, and other collaborators. The most important factor in the analysis of the events is that this state has the fundamental property of the state, namely it commands the means of violence and can designate who and on what grounds may use the violence . On this basis, on July 10, the state of Jedwabne allowed the use of violence by everyone and without any restrictions, provided the Jews and only the Jews would be targeted. Violence against the Jews was not just permitted but also expected and rewarded (by promise of participation in the spoils), whereas attempts to resist could result in punishment. This way the stage was set for a series of acts of savagery to be played out, with the willing executioners from the local population acting

singly or in groups of two or three. In addition, on that day, the state called up a certain number of men into an auxiliary service, to implement the (state-inspired) plan of genocide. Some tried to shirk this order; some did what they were told under duress and reluctantly; some willingly applied themselves to even the most ghastly assignments.

The final outcome clearly shows that the essential posts were sufficiently manned and that it was possible to murder nearly the entire community within one day with relatively little involvement of German forces. Assuming that more than a few “taxis” filled with Germans arrived in town, that their number was closer to the testimony given before the court by the cook Julia Sokolowska – sixty Gestapo men together with many (several dozen?) gendarmes – this was still a relatively small force to cope with the task of killing anywhere from several hundred to 1,500 Jews.

In the town of Józefów, mentioned above, an entire battalion – 500 armed men – was deployed against 1,800 Jews. In Bialystok, on July 12-13, 1941, two battalions conducted the operation of shooting to death more than 3,000 Jews. Thus, without the participation of the local population, the Germans present in Jedwabne on July 10, 1941, would hardly have been able to murder all the Jews that day on their own. Undoubtedly, they could have done it later on, as they did in hundreds of other localities. As it happened, they didn't have to.

Nation and Treason

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to a certain problem that remains deeply embedded in the ongoing debate on the Jedwabne crime. Some participants, including persons of considerable reputation, speak about the need for apology, expression of regret, or another such act, which should be performed in the name of the Poles, as it were. An act of this kind has two aspects, as I see them. The first has to do with taking a stand with regard to the crime. It entails a renewed and solemn condemnation of this criminal action and an affirmation of the innocence of the victims. As such, it arouses no reservations. Of particular importance here is the question of innocence, of defending the victims against insinuations, especially since we hear voices

that the events in Jedwabne should be seen as a just repayment. But there is also a second aspect; namely, recognition and articulation of a certain connection between those making the apology, and the Poles in general, on the one hand, and the persons who engaged in the criminal acts, on the other hand. This aspect calls for public reflection.

I do not have in mind here the issue of collective responsibility, encompassing persons who were not personally involved in the events of July 10, 1941, or the question of who is entitled to speak on behalf of Poles in general. Both these issues generate understandable controversies. Here I would like to draw attention to the fact that the Poles who willingly took part in the murder of the Jews of Jedwabne and then failed to express remorse are the last ones with whom the Polish people should associate itself in any fashion through this form of a symbolic act. They were not only murderers but also traitors, who collaborated with the enemy to the detriment of their fellow countrymen. By cooperating with the occupier against their Jewish neighbors, they clearly violated the fundamental laws of the Polish Republic. Their motives for committing treason – ethnic hatred, desire for revenge, or booty – are of secondary importance. The fact remains. Let us add here that, according to the sources at our disposal, some of them had managed to commit an act of treason twice within a short time: first by collaborating with the Soviets, and immediately afterward with the Germans. They did all this to the detriment of their neighbors and compatriots, in violation of the laws of the Republic, and against calls by the legitimate leaders of the country.

The duality of the act of apology can appear even more ambivalent in view of the fact that the victims of the crime, as citizens of the Republic, were a part of the Polish nation. We should exercise great caution so that an act of this kind will not alienate the victims again. After all, it is the victims who, more than anything, make demands on our memory.

Translated from the Polish by Jerzy Michalowicz

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, XXX, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 21-50.

