

Thoughts of Professor Tomasz Strzembosz on Professors Gutman's Diary.

Professor Israel Gutman kindly wrote a few words about me in an article published in the April 2001 issue of *Więź*. The article also served as an introduction to the book *Thou Shalt not Kill; Poles on Jedwabne*, also published by *Więź*. Entitled "Cry and Silence," it contains the following passage:

...it was with no small surprise and disappointment that I read an exhaustive article by Prof. Tomasz Strzembosz, the doyen of historians of the Polish underground, entitled: "Covered-Up Collaboration." He claims that: "the Jewish population, especially youths and the town-dwelling poor, staged a mass welcome for the invading [Soviet] army and took part in introducing the new order, some with weapons in hand." The Jewish poor with weapons... Strzembosz's rumors and generalized accusations, which he lays on thick, are the products of fantasy and are not worth discussing. Although he does not say so clearly, these words suggest a certain tit for tat approach to Jedwabne - you hurt us, so now we'll hurt you!¹

Pretty strong words, aren't they?

I would like to ask the known researcher of Polish-Jewish relations, including the war period, whether it is true that in sixteen cities and small towns, in the areas of so-called western Belarus alone, Polish nationals of Jewish extraction took up arms in order to use them against Polish soldiers, policemen, refugees from central Poland, and the structure of the Polish state. The localities in question include: Grodno, Skidel, Jeziory, Łunna, Wiercieliszki, Wielka Brzostowica, Ostryna, Dubna, Dereczyn, Zelwa, Motol, Wołpa, Janów Poleski, Wołkowysk, and Drohiczyn Poleski.

If the honorable professor does not know about this, it attests only to his ignorance. It means that he has not followed Polish literature of the 1990s, has not read collections of documents based on Soviet materials translated into Polish. After all, these data can be found in books that constitute the fundamental, canonical readings of every student of issues relating to the

¹ Israel Gutman, "Introduction," in William Brand, ed., *Thou Shalt Not Kill; Poles on Jedwabne* (Warsaw: *Więź*, 2001), p. 14.

Polish-Soviet war in 1939, as well as to the months of occupation and annexation that followed. Just to refresh our memory, I would like to name some of these publications, listing the names of localities where Jewish and Jewish-Belorussian insurrections took place. Will this be specific enough?

1. Ryszard Szawłowski ("Karol Liszewski"), *Wojna polsko-sowiecka 1939* (Warsaw: Neriton, 1996), 2 vols. (page numbers following the "slash" sign refer to vol. II): Grodno (pp. 106, 107/ 44, 58, 68, 71, 74, 106), Ostryna (pp. 58, 98), Jezioro (pp. 142/44, 58), Skidel (pp. 107-108/ 52, 53), Wołkowysk (p. 129), as well as Indura (p. 58), which I did not mention.
2. Czesław K. Grzelak, *Kresy w czerwieni. Agresja Związku Sowieckiego na Polskę w 1939 roku* (Warsaw: Neriton, 1998): Grodno (p. 337), Jezioro (p. 370), Ostryna (p. 370), Skidel (p. 333), Dubno (p. 333).
3. Czesław K. Grzelak, *Wrzesień 1939 na Kresach w relacjach. Wybór i opracowanie* (Warsaw: Neriton, 1999): Grodno (pp. 177, 180, 195), Jezioro (pp. 190, 225), Łunna Wola (p. 212), Ostryna (pp. 190, 225-226, 230-231), Wołkowysk (p. 211), Zelwa (p. 211), Skidel (pp. 212-214), Dubno (pp. 203, 212-213).
4. Wiktor Krzysztof Cygan, *Kresy w ogniu. Wojna polsko-sowiecka 1939* (Warsaw: Warszawska Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1990): Grodno (pp. 42-43).
5. Czesław K. Grzelak, *Dziennik sowieckiej agresji. Wrzesień 1939* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Gryf" 1994): Grodno (p. 123), Dubno (p. 149), Jezioro (p. 149), Ostryna (p. 135), Skidel (p. 135, 154), Pinsk (p. 156).
6. Marek Wierzbicki, *Polacy i Białorusini w zaborze sowieckim. Stosunki polsko-białoruski na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej pod okupacją sowiecką 1939-1941* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, 2000): Antopol na Polesiu (p. 92), Dereczyn (p. 163), Drohiczyn Poleski (pp. 175-176), Dubno (p. 143), Grodno (pp. 63-64, 132-134, 135, 202), Horodec (pp. 92, 176), Jezioro (pp. 139-142,

171, 178, 208), Łunna (pp. 137, 198, 205), Motol (pp. 92-93, 179), Ostryna (p. 139, 171, 178, 205, 208), Skidel (pp. 77-78, 133, 135-137, 171, 201, 208), Wielka Brzostowica (pp. 66, 70, 72, 76, 137-138), Wiercieliszki (p. 137), Wołkowysk (p. 148), Zelwa (pp. 147-148, 178); in general, on attitudes of Jews toward Soviet authorities and the Poles: pp. 48, 89, 205, 240-241.

7. Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Żydzi i Polacy 1918-1955. Współistnienie – zagłada – komunizm* (Warsaw: S.K. Fronda, 2000), pp. 120-136.

My own book *Saga o "Lupaszce" podpułkownika Jerzym Dąmbrowskim (1889-1941)*,² contains extensive information about revolts in Jeziory and Ostryna. It was here that the future hero of the Polish partisan movement, Major Henryk Dobrzański ("Hubal"), while commanding the 1st squadron of the 110th Reserve Cavalry Regiment of Lieutenant Colonel Dąmbrowski, burned Ostryna and Jeziory, where Jewish insurrection halted the march to Grodno of the dismounted cavalymen of the 103rd Reserve Light Cavalry Regiment, by firing on them from windows and basements. Professor Czesław Grzelak writes about these events thus:

The 110th regiment was assigned a difficult task – to suppress communist-subversive activities along the marching route of the brigade [Reserve Cavalry Brigade of Lieutenant Colonel Heldut-Tarnasiewicz – T.S]. There were many such activities; some of the stronger groups even had heavy machine-guns at their disposal. Lieutenant Colonel Dąmbrowski suppressed such "insurrections" in Ostryna and Jeziory. Houses from which sounds of grenade explosions were heard, and rifle shells were cached, were burned. Those caught with firearms on their person were not taken prisoner by the cavalymen. They were shot right then and there.³

This relates only to rebellions in cities and small towns inhabited by Polish Jews (including the three-day-long revolt in Grodno, which attacked from the inside the improvised defense of the city, then under attack from the Red Army; later the same persons were employed to hunt down participants in the defense, Polish high-school students and scouts, who were executed on the

² Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1996.

³ Grzelak, *Kresy w czerwieni*, p. 370.

spot). I have not mentioned anti-Polish partisan units headed by Polish nationals of Jewish extraction. Nor have I dealt more extensively with “militias” or “guards,” often composed of the same persons.

Then came occupation and “formal” annexation. People’s Militia and Workers’ Guards - organized by the Red Army - replaced improvised militia units. In this respect Jews were preponderant in cities and small towns. Not only among “ordinary” enthusiasts, who brought flowers, built victory arches, kissed Soviet tanks (yes, that’s true, several authors mention such incidents), but also among those who actively affirmed their enthusiasm by taking up arms. Professor Jan Tomasz Gross wrote about the former in his book *W czterdziestym nas Matko na Sybir zeslali*:

The entering Red Army was greeted with joy by the Jews.⁴ Groups of Jews, sometimes quite large, did so in public in almost every locality taken over by the Soviet troops. Usually, they comprised youth and the poor, and among the Jews there were plenty of these, since poverty and high birth rate go together. Many enthusiastic supporters of the new regime showed up. Their numbers were sufficiently large to leave lasting impression on the memory of not only Poles and the Ukrainians – whose testimonies can be suspected of lack of objectivity. The Jews themselves noticed their stupidity with the benefit of hindsight, writing that in the first period of the occupation their relations with the new arrivals from the East turned out very well...⁵

Youngsters and poor people. This is how Professor Jan Gross himself saw things, before his sight dimmed and obscured the picture.

However, Jewish researchers also came to similar conclusions; the honorable Professor should know their works best. Thus, for example, Tikva Fatal Knaani admitted that Jewish-Belorussian squads attacked Polish government centers, broke into the Grodno prison, and that in response the Poles organized a pogrom. He expressed satisfaction at the fact that the “pogromists” were later severely punished by the Soviets.⁶

We should keep in mind in this context that the phenomenon of Polish Jews joining Soviet militia was characteristic not only of the so-called Western

⁴ Yad Vashem Archives, 63/1791; 03.2782; 033.666)

⁵ *W czterdziestym nas Matko na Sybir zeslali. Polska – Rosja 1939-42* (London: Aneks, 1983), p. 29.

⁶ Chodakiewicz, *Żydzi i Polacy*, p. 121.

Belarus. It encompassed also ethnically Polish areas, such as the Lublin province, where the eastern regions were seized by the Red Army at the end of September 1939, and suffered occupation for about two weeks.

Eliezer Holfman from Izbica testified as follows:

Germans stayed in Izbica for twelve days... The Bolsheviks came on Thursday, and the Jewish population heaved a sigh of relief. They [the Soviets] were greeted in a friendly fashion. Some Jewish youngsters registered to join the militia and wore red armbands. The militiamen helped to search for weapons...⁷

Also in Krzeszów “many people enlisted in the red militia,”⁸ and a similar picture emerges in Biłgoraj and other localities.⁹

What about collaboration with NKVD? Here it is well worth quoting Jan Karski-Kozielewski, whom no Jew in full possession of his faculties can accuse of antisemitism, and who was honored in Israel.¹⁰ Let me quote from his February 1940 report a passage that Professor Gross did not dare to quote in his *Upiorna Dekada* of 1998,¹¹ even though he devoted much attention to it: “But worst of all, Jews inform on Poles, direct militia work from behind the scenes, and make unjustified criticism of conditions in Poland before the war. Unfortunately, it has to be said that such incidents occur frequently.”¹²

Can these contentions of Jan Karski also be defined as “rumors” and “generalized accusations?” Furthermore, there were similar reports by ZWZ [Związek Walki Zbrojnej, the Union for Armed Struggle, which became the Armia Krajowa (Home Army), in February 1942 - Ed.] commanders at different levels, including the report by General Stefan Rowecki, as well as a report of the Government’s Representation (*Delegatura*) in Poland, which could also be

⁷ Archiwum Wschodnie, Protokoły Palestyńskie, protocol no. 31.

⁸ Testimony of Józef Rosenberg of Krzeszów, *ibid.*, protocol no. 65.

⁹ Testimony of Baruch Flamenbaum, *ibid.*, protocol no. 79.

¹⁰ Editor’s Note: Jan Karski was a courier for the Polish underground, who, in November 1942, delivered eyewitness testimony to the Polish Government-in-Exile and to the Allied powers regarding the murder of the Jews. In 1982, he was honored by Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous Among the Nations.

¹¹ *Upiorna Dekada: trzy eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i Komunistów 1939-1948* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 1998).

¹² Zagadnienie żydowskie w Polsce pod okupacjami, Archiwum Wschodnie (Warsaw) – zbiory Hoover Institute, V-PAL-02, page 7. See also David Engel, “An Early Account of Polish Jewry under Nazi and Soviet Occupation Presented to the Polish Government-in-Exile, February 1940,” *Jewish Social Studies* 47 (1983), pp. 1-16.

quoted here. Can these, too, be described as rumors and generalized accusations? If so, what does Professor Gutman describe as not a "rumor"; what does he consider genuine?

Let us dwell a little, then, on a few specifics from Jedwabne.

Jadwiga Kordas, née Wąsowska, recalls that when the Soviets arrested her father, Franciszek Ksawery Wąsowski, on October 20, 1939, three Jewish neighbors took part in the arrest: the glazier Janowicz, residing at Przestrzelska Street; the baker Chylewski, residing at Stary Rynek; and a third one whose name she does not recall. They also searched the house and took away a photograph of her father dressed in a Polish police uniform. Her father had been retired for ten years, and in his active service he had been stationed at localities fairly distant from Jedwabne. This means that someone must have "opened a file" on the retired policeman who wore civilian clothes.

Genowefa Malczyńska recalls that on June 20, 1941, two NKVD functionaries arrived in her house with a deportation order for the entire family; outside, at the gate to the garden, two Jewish neighbors kept guard. Later, during a conversation face to face with one of the NKVD men, he clearly intimated that the local Jews pointed out the people who should be deported to the Soviet interior. She related this incident to Agnieszka Arnold, who interviewed her as part of her film about Jedwabne.¹³ This little snippet, however, failed to arouse the filmmaker's interest, just as the fact that when the family was brought to the Łomża railway station, next to a dozing Soviet soldier, a Jewish neighbor armed with a rifle bravely kept guard. There was nowhere to hide.

Franciszek Karwowski, one of those who sheltered Shmuel Wassersztajn during this difficult period, before he ended up with the Wyrzykowski family, was a witness to the pursuit of his acquaintance Szymborski, who was fleeing Jedwabne. The pursuit was led by two mounted Jews from Jedwabne with red armbands and armed with rifles. They put their weapons to "proper" use then. Should I go on quoting the examples, or is it enough?

Professor Gutman should not suggest that by quoting these acts of hostility on the part of the Jedwabne Jews I wish to justify Polish or German-Polish crimes against the Jews. First of all, it was you, Professor Gutman, who

¹³ *Where Is My Older Brother Cain?*, 1999.

forced me to quote the specific examples by making your accusations. Second, at the beginning of the text besmirched by you, I wrote that no crime, especially a crime committed on the grounds of collective responsibility, is justifiable. No such crime, whether committed by Poles, Jews, or Germans, can be justified.

Similarly, nothing can justify the fact that those American Jews - and not only them - who were thrifty with their dollars during the war to save their brethren in Poland and refused to believe in Jan Karski's "revelations" - and not only his - now raise a hue and cry; that the 700 thoroughly documented cases, together with several hundred not finally verified facts of Poles who gave their lives for the sake of their murdered compatriots, that all these are not enough, that there should have been more...

In conclusion, I wish you, Professor Gutman, less aggression and contempt for the views of others and more reflection and tolerance; it is just possible that occasionally others, too, could be right, even a little. I count on the fact that this lapse, not the first one, on the part of a great scholar will teach him something. After all, I should not count on his saying "I am sorry."

Translated from the Polish by Jerzy Michałowicz

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