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Jedwabne: Revisiting the Evidence and Nature of the Crime

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***Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Jan T. Gross (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 216 pp., \$19.95.**

“On a summer day in 1941 in Nazi-occupied Poland, half of the town of Jedwabne brutally murdered the other half: 1,600 men, women and children—all but seven of the town’s Jews.” This statement, which appears on the back cover of *Neighbors*, provides the most concise summary of Jan T. Gross’s book. *Neighbors* deserves careful reading and serious critique. This is not just a well-written story. This is historiography.¹

Many historians may envy the author the impact his small volume has had. Within a year it has been published in Polish, English, German, and Hebrew; major newspapers in Europe, North America, and Israel have reviewed it or commented upon it. It caused heated controversy and the largest public historical debate ever in Poland. At least 300 articles on the book, the crime, and its contemporary consequences have appeared in the Polish press, along with innumerable discussions on TV, radio, the Internet, and in public gatherings. Major statements on the topic have been issued by the president of Poland, ministers, parliamentarians, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and most prominent intellectuals.

Gross, an émigré sociologist and historian who has lived in the United States for thirty years and who is author of two outstanding studies on Poland under the German and Soviet occupations,² has overcome the decades-long process of public forgetting of a crime that ended the history of the Jedwabne Jewish community. As a consequence of the publication of *Neighbors* and of the ensuing debate, a monument commemorating the crime was dedicated in Jedwabne in a 2001 ceremony attended by major public figures, and ninety percent of Polish respondents now recognize the name of the town as the place of the crime.

This article does not address the debate over Gross’s book; that issue deserves a separate, lengthier analysis. Those interested may consult numerous articles that have been published on the topic.³ While this essay benefits from the diverse body of critical comments presented in the debate so far, it focuses on Gross’s book and on the crime itself.⁴

Both the subject matter and the writer’s skill contribute to the powerful impact *Neighbors* has had on readers, whether or not they agree with its conclusions. Discus-

sion of the Polish-Jewish past is now nearly unimaginable without reference to Jedwabne. The book encouraged a new wave of research and reflection that has expanded our knowledge well beyond the history of one town.⁵ If *Neighbors* were simply poorly researched and written, as some of Gross's critics charge, it would not have been so influential. However, this does not mean the book is flawless.

Two of Gross's key claims are open to question, casting doubt upon certain general conclusions of the book. There are good reasons to believe that "half of the town" did not commit murder and that the victims did not number 1,600. To raise such doubts is not to deny the fact that a large group of Poles were involved or to alter judgment upon the crime and its participants. Nor should it weaken the impetus to revise rosy narratives about Polish-Jewish relations. It may, however, change perceptions of the event, its explanation, and consequently its meaning.

The available evidence is far from sufficient to confirm the number of victims with satisfactory precision; estimates vary from 300 to 1,600. Nor can we responsibly state the names or number of perpetrators, aside from the several men whose participation seemingly was proven in postwar trials. We do not know enough about the specific actions of the Germans present (or exactly how many of them were in town). We can only surmise how and with whom the idea of the total killing originated. While we possess details of certain events, we understand their sequence only in broad terms. A number of eyewitness accounts raise doubts. (These comments also apply to a similar massacre in the neighboring town of Radziłów.) Reading the book, historians may notice the lack of qualifiers such as "probably" or "possibly," which—probably—would have deprived the book of a measure of its power. They might also have deprived some readers of the illusion of certitude or understanding.

The evidence cited in the book comes mostly from two sets of sources: the postwar accounts of a few Jewish survivors and records from the 1949–53 interrogations and trials of the Polish perpetrators by the communist "Security Office" (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, or UB) and the Polish courts. These sources provide a sufficient basis for defining the major features of the crime: its genocidal character and horrifying cruelty, the significant number of Polish participants, and the German involvement, which was more limited than in hundreds of other massacres of Jews in the summer and autumn of 1941. However, both groups of sources have limitations and can be interpreted in divergent ways. German sources are virtually absent (*Neighbors* cites a few indirect sources), and the book goes far beyond depicting the above features, opening the door for legitimate controversy.

The only known direct evidence from the time that the crime was committed is the mass graves of the victims. But because only a circumscribed archeological exploration of the site was conducted, it has yielded no exact number of those buried there. Nevertheless, experts agree that there are no more than 400–450 bodies. This figure is compatible with the size of the barn that constituted the killing site (19 × 7 meters, or 62 × 23 feet).⁶ Moreover, it finds support in Polish prewar and Soviet wartime statis-

tics. Prewar publications state that the town's population consisted of forty percent Jews and sixty percent Christians (the reverse of the figures cited in *Neighbors*), which means there were approximately 1,000 Jews.⁷ Soviet data from September 1940 lists 1,400 Jews in the entire Jedwabne *raion*—the administrative unit that included the towns of Radziłów and Wizna. Another Soviet document from 1940 states 562 Jews in Jedwabne, approximately 500 in Radziłów, and 476 in Wizna, which totals 1,538.⁸

If the number of victims was approximately 500, what could have happened to 300–500 hundred Jedwabne Jews between the time of the Polish and Soviet statistics and July 1941? One possible explanation is intensive migration: in September 1939 the Germans sent many Jews into forced labor; during 1940–41 significant numbers of Jews were deported into the Soviet interior; some Jews from Soviet-occupied Poland migrated east in search of jobs; and after the German attack in June 1941 many Jews tried to escape eastward. On the other hand, in this period Jedwabne also witnessed the immigration of Jews from other localities, and the survivors' accounts do not mention a substantial population decline before the massacre. Thus the number of the victims cannot be definitively proven, although estimates ranging from 400–800 seem much more plausible than those above 1,000.

Alexander B. Rossino rightly emphasizes that the failure to examine German documents affected the depiction of events in *Neighbors*.⁹ While we know of no wartime German documents bearing directly on Jedwabne, some evidence of relevant German policies and actions in the newly conquered territory, especially the operations of the German Security Police, Gestapo, and SS units in the Białystok region, is available and provides essential context. The fact that exactly at the time of the Jedwabne murder Germans began the systematic killing of Jews in occupied territory deserves more attention. The context of the crime—the unfolding Nazi Holocaust—is largely missing from the book.

The documents show that a wave of anti-Jewish violence by the local populace followed Nazi orders to Germans to intensify efforts to encourage “self-cleansing” by anticommunist and antisemitic activists. These orders came in response to Himmler's complaint, in late June 1941, that pogroms had not yet broken out in the Białystok region.¹⁰ Documents from postwar investigations in several cases of German-organized or incited assaults against Jews in the latter region show striking similarities to the events in Jedwabne. For instance, a survivor testifying for a West German trial identified the German officer who had overseen the massacre in Radziłów. This officer likely commanded the German detachments that arrived in Jedwabne two or three days later and participated in the crime there.¹¹ Similarities in these cases most likely are not incidental and therefore cast doubt upon Gross's assertion that the Germans' role in Jedwabne was “limited, pretty much, to their taking pictures.”¹² Notably, the orders to incite pogroms included specific instruction to leave no trace of German involvement.

The reliability of the evidence presented at the 1949–53 trials is more problematic than the author assumes. We learn from the book that in court many witnesses and

defendants withdrew their testimonies given previously to the investigative authorities (the UB). They claimed that the interrogating officers had coerced them into signing the depositions. Although Gross admits that these allegations were “very plausible . . . given the methods that were employed at the time by the UB,” he believes the materials produced can serve us well, because “this was not a political trial. . . . The matter was handled as a routine case.”¹³

Inexperienced readers may conclude that unless the communist secret police had political reasons to manufacture evidence, they provided a good source of information. Yet UB officers routinely resorted to torture to make their work faster and easier, and to make suspects plead guilty or incriminate others. They evidently behaved no differently with respect to the Jedwabne case. At least nine participants in the trial confirmed this before the court: “At the interrogation I said what they [UB officers] demanded from me [because] I was beaten a lot”; “During the interrogation I was forced to speak against other people, because I was beaten.”¹⁴

Statements made under such conditions may be of questionable value not only because of the tendency to “minimize both the events and the extent of their [the defendants’] own involvement,” as Gross rightly notes. It is particularly plausible that not all those listed in the interrogation protocols had participated in the crime. Yet Gross combines these names to reach a total of ninety-two Polish participants in the Jedwabne killing.

There is another reason to interpret the trial protocols cautiously. Gross asserts—explicitly in the original Polish edition and implicitly in the English-language one—that the accused did not blame the Germans because that would have been too obvious a lie. This assumption is incorrect. Every act of accusation has a legal basis, and the line of defense must take this into account. In the Jedwabne case it was the August 1944 decree that targeted traitors and collaborators, not ordinary murderers (which the book properly notes).¹⁵ The specific accusation against the men from Jedwabne was that “acting in a manner that fostered the interests of the German state, [they] participated in the apprehension of about 1200 persons of Jewish nationality,” who then “were burned by the Germans in a barn.” Emphasizing the role of the Germans would confirm that the crime of collaboration had taken place. Thus contrary to Gross’s assertion, blaming the Germans would have constituted a poor line of defense.

Instead the testimonies consistently ascribe the key role in the crime to the mayor, Marian Karolak (who disappeared in 1949). Although he did play a central role, in a legal sense he also served as the main collaborator—the intermediary between the Germans and Poles. Most outspoken in downplaying German responsibility was Karol Bardoń, an unemployed mill worker who served as the closest collaborator with the German gendarmes in July 1941. Bardoń later registered with the *Deutsche Volksliste* and wore a German uniform. For unknown reasons the book treats him as an especially reliable source. These arguments do not tell us what the Germans actually did in Jedwabne—only that the protocols do not provide good evidence for the claim that the Germans

were passive. Similarly, testimonies extracted by violent means may not be completely false, but they require careful case-by-case examination and crosschecking of sources.

Jewish survivors' accounts, which the author quotes extensively, are central to Gross's thesis. He devotes to them a separate chapter, "New Approach to Sources," in which he proposes an "in principal affirmative" approach towards the evidence. The value of survivor testimonies is unquestionable, and they supply a large portion of our knowledge of this crime, but historians should not ignore their limitations or abandon critical standards. In several instances, sources cited in the book have been proven to offer unreliable information.

The extreme case is that of Eliaasz Grądowski. He testified to the Security Office that he had witnessed the crime (he provided thirty-five names of alleged perpetrators), but in reality he had been deported in 1940 into the Soviet interior. He returned to Poland only after the war.¹⁶ Similarly unreliable is the testimony of Abram Boruszcak, who reportedly was not present in the town during the war. Wiktor Nieławicki recounts that a Jedwabne Jewish delegation offered a gift to the Catholic bishop of Łomża to try to induce him to prevent a pogrom and to intervene with the Germans on the Jews' behalf (p. 71). The story appears quite probable and the delegation's reported effort fits well with the centuries-old tradition of the role of the Jewish *shtadlan* ("court Jew"), but the bishop of Łomża had been in hiding since 1939 and returned only in late July 1941.¹⁷ Despite its implausibility, this story remains in the foreign editions of *Neighbors* without comment. Grądowski and Boruszcak are still cited as witnesses, although Boruszcak's name has been removed from the index.

Szmul Wasersztajn and Rivka Fogel, two other survivors cited in *Neighbors*, give contradictory statements. Wasersztajn depicts a horrible scene of two Jewish mothers, who—to avoid a cruel death at their Polish neighbors' hands—drown their babies in a pond and then attempt to commit suicide, in front of applauding gentiles. In Fogel's account, the gentiles came to rescue the two women, who attempted suicide because of German, not Polish, persecution. Gross quotes Wasersztajn's version of the event and fails to mention Fogel's, despite the fact that the author knew of Fogel's account and cited other portions of it elsewhere in the book.¹⁸

Wasersztajn's testimony is crucial to Gross's understanding of the crime. Wasersztajn attempts to provide a comprehensive narrative, which includes important events that he evidently could not see (such as the meeting between Gestapo officers and the town administration). He also offers contradictory information about the initiative for the mass murder: first we read it was a German order, then we learn it was the idea of their Polish counterparts and that Germans initially wanted to limit the massacre. Gross favors the latter explanation. Although he removed from the book the explicit claim that the Polish administration planned the murder, readers of the English-language edition still learn that the Polish authorities "consulted" with the Germans (p. 72), which implies that the plan originated with the former.

The book tends to present the town's administration (i.e., Karolak and his dep-

uties), as the “town council” or “councilors,” creating the impression it was a legitimate, perhaps even representative, authority. How Karolak became the mayor is unclear. He is not known to have had any public role before the war. His administration either was appointed by the Germans, or took charge on its own initiative early in the German occupation and then was approved by the occupier. Gross states that this administration made an agreement with Gestapo officers (p. 75). Such wording implies a partnership between parties that were more than unequal; Mayor Karolak was the Germans’ subordinate. More likely, the Gestapo briefed Karolak and gave him orders.

At times Gross goes so far as to seemingly deny German participation in the crime, for instance when he states “the 1,600 Jedwabne Jews were killed neither by the NKVD, nor by the Nazis.” To be sure, he mentions the German presence and their ultimate responsibility, but it appears that the Germans contributed most through their passivity—their decision not to intervene (p. 77). The German behavior in Jedwabne differs from what we know about the extermination of hundreds of other Jewish communities in occupied Poland; most likely they did not kill the Jews with their own hands but it would be remarkable if their contribution to the crime consisted of no more than taking photographs.

Of all the Jews who were in Jedwabne on the morning of July 10 only a handful lived to see the evening. The killing was almost total and the perpetrators proved highly efficient. Our retrospective knowledge of later episodes of the Holocaust obscures the radical novelty of the genocidal crime in Jedwabne. This killing was different from the pogroms that had taken place earlier in Eastern Europe.¹⁹ The wave of anti-Jewish violence that swept over the Ukraine in 1918–19 provides a suitable comparison. It is rightly believed to have comprised the worst massacres of Jews since the Chmielnicki rebellion in the seventeenth century, and the factors that seem to have contributed to the crime in Jedwabne—ethnic resentment, prejudice, the stereotype of “Jewish Bolsheviks,” and greed—were not weaker or less widespread in the Ukraine in 1919. Henry Abramson’s detailed analysis of the data on 1,300 pogroms in the Ukraine shows that in thirty-six percent of them fewer than ten persons perished, in eighty-eight percent the death toll was below one hundred, and in no case did the death rate even approximate that of Jedwabne. In general, eighty percent of Jewish families in the localities affected by the Ukrainian pogroms survived without casualties.²⁰ Had events in Jedwabne been limited to attacks on Jewish houses and businesses by an excited mob of Poles, the result likely would have resembled the pogroms in the Ukraine.

As of July 10, 1941, the extent of the killing in Jedwabne had few precedents even among the mass murders that had taken place elsewhere behind the German-Soviet front line, with or without participation by local populations. Jedwabne was by no means the largest such killing—the first pogroms in Kaunas and Lwow (Lviv), each of which resulted in several thousand deaths, took place almost concurrently. These killings, however, targeted primarily Jewish males and amounted to a small fraction of the Jewish population of these cities; they were massive but not total.

Genocidal killing was new not only as a practice, but as an imaginable option as well. As far as I know, such an idea had never appeared in prewar antisemitic writings in Poland. Although the rhetoric of Polish antisemites was often eliminationist in nature, they saw Jewish emigration as the “final solution of the Jewish question.”²¹ In peasant culture, the image of Jews was highly ambiguous (as “close aliens” and “sacred strangers”), and it by no means implied a genocidal response.²² Peasant mob violence (which *Neighbors* cites as relevant) either in the nineteenth-century or in the 1930s, had different aims and clearly was not meant to kill en masse.²³

The genocidal outcome in Jedwabne can hardly be construed as the unintended consequence of unorganized, largely chaotic actions by bloodthirsty perpetrators, as *Neighbors* so vividly depicts. The episode was more an “organized evil,” to use Stanley Milgram’s expression, than a cumulative effect of the “cacophony of violence,” as Gross presents it.²⁴ The killing was systematic and organized, and the “cacophony of violence” seems to have been orchestrated as part of a broader action that had a plan and an order. The objective was total: to kill each and every Jew in the town. The sources make clear that all Jews were to be gathered in the marketplace, that any attempts to escape or hide were to be prevented, and that all who were in the market square were to be killed. The goal and the result in Jedwabne were comprehensive, as measured by the death rate.

Such highly efficient collective action requires organization. The mob’s limited capacity for self-organization makes it an unlikely agent for effective genocidal killing, which must be systematic. It takes a government or its substitute (such as a paramilitary group) to conduct a genocide.²⁵ There are sound reasons, therefore, to believe that the collective action that occurred in Jedwabne was of a character different from that described in *Neighbors*. The book went too far in marginalizing the role of the state (which appeared in its basic form, as the coercion-wielding organization that determines the conditions under which individuals may apply violence).

The plan was reportedly prepared or elaborated at the meeting between Gestapo officers and the town’s administration (most sources date this July 10). On the morning of July 10, members of the administration, usually with German gendarmes, visited Polish residents. They ordered a number of men to gather at a designated location, where sticks and clubs (which someone had to have stockpiled earlier) were distributed. Polish conscripts were given specific assignments, such as driving the Jews to the market square, keeping watch over those assembled, guarding the streets leading out of town, and later escorting the Jews from the square to the barn outside town. The killing of a few dozen Jewish men at an early stage of the action was apparently premeditated. They were first forced to “exercise” or parade carrying a heavy Lenin statue, which exhausted and humiliated them. They were then marched out of town and slaughtered in small groups, which gave the executioners numerical superiority over the victims at the killing site. Eliminating the able-bodied men helped decrease the risk of resistance in the next stage, when the crowd of remaining beaten and terrorized Jews (mostly women,

elderly and children) was driven to the barn. The apparently small scale of looting on that day also indicates a level of organization and discipline. Eventually the administration and Polish individuals took the victims' property, but nothing along these lines seems to have taken place during the massacre, which is most unusual for a pogrom.

The crime had a division of labor, which structured the collective action with various roles marked by different degrees of involvement in killing and use of violence. Because of their shocking deeds, the direct killers—"willing executioners" armed with iron tools or wooden clubs—were most clearly remembered by witnesses. Those "standing on the market square" guarded the assembled Jews (the only role to which defendants in the 1949 trial were willing to confess). Others performed auxiliary tasks such as emptying the barn beforehand. In contrast to the bloody deeds of the executioners, such actions did not require moral savagery or hatred towards the victims; it is possible to conclude that those who performed such assignments were obeying orders (though prejudice and resentment of Jews may have helped them to do so). Between the extremes there were various other tasks marked by differing degrees of violence, such as removing the Jews from their houses. The genocidal outcome resulted from all these actions combined and coordinated.

By focusing on the direct killers' acts, the book fails to emphasize sufficiently differentiate levels of involvement and commitment among the participants, such as those who joined unwillingly and under duress (including, reportedly, beating and threats with firearms by the German gendarmes), or those who abandoned their posts at the first opportunity. Testimonies at the trial refer to such participants, and this evidence is difficult to square with Gross's claim that the "local population involved in killing of Jews did so of its own free will" (p. 133).²⁶ Some killers clearly exercised free will, but they were not the only people involved. Extrapolating witness accounts of "willing executioners" to the whole group of participants in the killing action obscures the participants' motivations and the character of the crime. It also blurs the division of labor (and the fragmentation of responsibility it entails), which I believe to be crucial for understanding this crime.

This generalization, combined with the questionable figure of ninety-two participants from Jedwabne, provides the basis of Gross's claims that the "Polish half of the town" murdered the Jewish half or that "ordinary Poles slaughtered the Jews." Such statements require stronger evidence than that offered by the book. First, the conclusion that approximately fifty percent of the adult Polish male population of the town participated in the crime seems based upon a mistaken assumption about the town's ethnic structure. As mentioned earlier, non-Jews made up sixty (not forty) percent of the prewar population of 2,500. If ninety-two adult male Poles participated, that would make twenty-five percent of the Polish population rather than fifty. Second, the figure of ninety-two participants from Jedwabne alone seems too high, given that some of the alleged killers' names were produced under torture or by people who had not been eye-witnesses. It is, of course, possible that other Poles who were not named in 1949 par-

ticipated, but the number ninety-two, which appears in the book as “hard data,” would then require new justification. There were many participants who contributed to the crime in greater or lesser degree—perhaps more than ninety-two—but a significant number of them came from outside Jedwabne (the book mentions “many peasants from hamlets” who arrived in town). Although these peasants increased the absolute number of participants, they cannot be included in calculating the participation rate among Jedwabne Poles (“half of the town”). The above arguments are not meant to address the question of Polish responsibility for the killings, but that of the killers’ “ordinariness.” If sixty or eighty participants were from Jedwabne, they constituted fifteen to twenty percent of the adult males, or four to five percent of all Polish residents.

Furthermore, the higher the number of participants we assume, the larger the number of those whose involvement was involuntary or auxiliary. The participants, the “willing executioners” in particular, were not a random sample. In all likelihood, when carrying out the conscription (which did not include all the men in town) and handing out various assignments, Mayor Karolak took into account the personality traits of the residents with whom he was familiar. More important, during the day a self-selection took place: various individuals joined or left the group of executioners by taking on or shirking assignments. Therefore, the comparison to the “ordinary men” of the German Reserve Police Battalion 101, who killed the Jews of Józefów (p. 120), is misleading. The “ordinary men” presented in Christopher Browning’s book were drafted into their unit, and they opted neither out nor in for the Józefów killings. Their selection into the second-class Reserve Police had rather a negative connotation from both a military and a Nazi ideological perspective. Those (exceptional) members of Battalion 101 who, during anti-Jewish actions, tended not to be involved directly in killing were given auxiliary tasks such as guarding—i.e., tasks similar to those assigned to a number of Jedwabne Poles counted as participants in the crime of July 10.²⁷

Gross’s previous book, *Revolution from Abroad*, contributed greatly to our knowledge of the Soviet occupation of Poland during 1939–41. Likewise *Neighbors* offers insights into the realities of Soviet occupation, which could have had an influence on the crime at Jedwabne. The dynamics of collaboration may have induced some wrongdoers in Jedwabne to serve subsequent totalitarian regimes. In broad terms, Soviet rule undermined the social order and weakened respect for norms. With its mass terror and incomprehensible rules, it implanted in many people a deep fear and a sense of the world as cruel and chaotic. Such traumatic experiences can result in strange thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Possibly some “ordinary men” ceased to be ordinary and took a step towards becoming “willing executioners.”

Gross dismisses claims of Jewish collaboration with the Soviets, and certainly there has been much exaggeration and unfounded generalization in this regard. But genuine collaboration did occur, especially at the early stage of the Soviet occupation, as many sources (including those well known to Gross) have testified.²⁸

The causes and conditions for some Jews’ collaboration with the Soviets consti-

tute a separate question. Its consideration should include factors such as the “comparative advantage” of Soviet rule vis-à-vis the Nazis and the poor record of Polish prewar minority policies. Taking into account the “visibility effects” and possible bias of relevant reports, we do not have sufficient basis to prove or disprove that “enthusiastic Jewish response to the entering Red Army was not a widespread phenomenon.” But the claim that “it is manifest that the local non-Jewish population enthusiastically greeted entering Wehrmacht units in 1941 and broadly engaged in collaboration with the Germans” is by no means stronger. Putting these two claims on the same page (p. 155) seems to reflect a certain asymmetry in the author’s approach.

If the anti-Jewish action in Jedwabne was co-organized by the Germans, the 1949 trial was correct in accusing the participants of collaboration, i.e., treason. To what extent did these Poles cooperate in the anti-Jewish action because it was directed against the Jews whom they wanted to harm (because of ethnic hatred and greed), and to what extent because they were ready to collaborate with the Germans, including, or in particular, in anti-Jewish actions? Events in the fall of 1939 may shed some light. In September 1939, soon after the German invasion of Poland, Jedwabne was taken by the Germans and, after a few weeks, handed to the Soviets on the basis of the German-Soviet agreement on the partition of Poland. There were no acts of collaboration at that time. There is no sign of assaults on Jedwabne Jews, although the Germans did not hide their anti-Jewish attitude. Evidently a significant shift occurred in the relationship among Poles, Jews, and Germans before the Germans returned in 1941. Preexisting anti-Jewish resentments and traditions of peasant violence were likely a necessary but not sufficient condition for Polish participation in the crime of July 10. Had they been a sufficient factor, some form of anti-Jewish violence might have broken out in Jedwabne in 1939. The specific factors of time and place seem to have greater explanatory power than such general factors, which *Neighbors* emphasizes.

A few other conditions are worth mentioning here. The known cases of direct and collective Polish collaboration in the killing of Jews are geographically and temporally concentrated. Investigations following the publication of *Neighbors* brought to the fore documentation of anti-Jewish assaults in several towns in the Łomża region (including Wąsosz, Radziłów Szczuczyn, Stawiski, and Goniądz) located a few miles from one another, all during a few weeks in the summer of 1941.²⁹ To explain the concentration we may look beyond the fact that “pogromists” moved from one town to another (as noted in *Neighbors*), and that German units in the area were implementing orders to induce “self-cleansing” actions.

The Soviet occupation may explain why Polish collaborators in Jedwabne could perceive as liberators the same German army that several months earlier, in 1939, had been seen as an invaders and enemies. In central and western Poland—in the Generalgouvernement and the areas incorporated into the Reich—Germans never appeared as liberators. 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; the river of Polish blood they eagerly spilled set them against the rest of the population. The development of a significant Polish underground movement and the widespread recognition of the Polish government-in-exile in London as the legitimate national leadership also contributed to a lack of organized Polish collaboration. The history of the German occupation is burdened with the problems—still awaiting thorough research—of individuals rendering services to Germans, of scattered cases of collaboration (including the persecution of Jews), of “private” preying on Jewish tragedy and defenselessness, as well as the “gray zone” of accommodation to the conditions of occupation. But it is virtually free of the problem of Polish collaborationist organizations or leaders, unlike in some other countries.³⁰

Poles under the Soviet occupation perceived Soviet rule as the worst possible outcome, and the Soviets were much more effective in destroying the Polish underground and the leadership strata in general. Thus the reactions to German entry in 1941 were initially different from those in central and western Poland. In Jedwabne, some pro-German leadership emerged among local Poles; it was ready and willing to collaborate against the Jews and able to involve other Poles. In the areas east of the Łomża region, ethnic groups other than Poles and Jews were prominent, a factor that altered Polish reactions to the 1941 German invasion. Lithuanian and Ukrainian nationalists were quick to establish armed organizations that, among others, took part in killing Jews, as designated in the German orders for “self-cleansing.” Local Poles, aware of the anti-Polish resentment of former Ukrainian and Lithuanian minorities, felt insecure; they were often afraid that they would be targeted next after the Jews. This may explain why the participants in the Jedwabne killing were Polish, but in the cases of the pogroms in Wilno (Vilnius) and Lwow (as well as in other towns in the former Eastern Poland) the participants were mainly Ukrainian and Lithuanian, although both cities had large Polish populations.

It is difficult to agree with Gross that the origin of the idea to kill all the Jews of Jedwabne is an academic question (p. 74). If it originated locally, with Karolak or his associates, we might then speak of “holocausts”: besides the Nazi Holocaust, there were other, smaller holocausts, which emerged coincidentally and independently. This unstated conclusion of the book fits well with Gross’s portrayal of a spontaneous, grass-roots pogrom. But an insufficiently documented, controversial, and in some respects seemingly unique event does not provide a satisfactory basis for so radically changing our understanding of the Holocaust and for depriving the Nazis of its authorship.

Notes

1. Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
2. Jan T. Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet*

Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

3. Selected major articles in English translation: Jacek Borkowicz, Zbigniew Nosowski, eds., *Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne* (Warsaw: Wiew, 2001); *Yad Vashem Studies XXX* (2002); *Polish Sociological Review I* (2002). In German see Ruth Henning, ed., *Die "Jedwabne-Debatte" in Polen* (Potsdam: Transodra, 2001). Many Polish articles about the book, the crime, and its contemporary consequences are available online at <http://www.pogranicze.sejny.pl>.

4. See in particular the excellent review by Antoni Sułek, "'Sąsiedzi'—zwykła recenzja," *Więź* 12 (2001), pp. 72–99; Alexander B. Rossino, "Polish 'Neighbors' and German Invaders: Contextualizing Anti-Jewish Violence in the Białystok District during the Opening Weeks of Operation Barbarossa," forthcoming in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 16; a harsh but detailed critique by Bogdan Musiał, "Tezy dotyczące pogromu w Jedwabnem. Uwagi krytyczne do książki *Sąsiedzi* autorstwa Jana Tomasa Grossa," *Dzieje Najnowsze* 3 (2001), pp. 253–80; Dariusz Stola, "A Monument of Words," *Yad Vashem Studies XXX* (2002), pp. 21–50. Unfortunately, among the Polish criticisms of the book, many hostile voices have offered misleading or simply false arguments.

5. The major publication on the topic is Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, eds., *Wokół Jedwabnego*, 2 vols. (Warsaw: Institute of National Remembrance [IPN], 2002). It appeared as this article went to press.

6. As a part of the renewed crime investigation, which began following the publication of *Neighbors*, the prosecutors conducted archeological research at the site of the massacre. In May 2001 two mass graves were explored, one with approximately 300–400 bodies, the other with thirty to fifty bodies and the remains of the Lenin statue. "Śledztwo IPN w sprawie mordu Żydów w Jedwabnem," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 20, 2001; "Ślubne obrączki i nóż rzezaka," *Rzeczpospolita*, July 10, 2001.

7. Henryk Mejer, *Stan gospodarczy powiatu łomżyńskiego oraz środki jego podniesienia* (Łomża, 1934), p. 14; Mieczysław Orłowicz, *Przewodnik ilustrowany po województwie białostockim* (Białystok, 1937), p. 168. Mejer gives 2,167 as the total 1932 population, of whom 858 persons spoke a native tongue other than Polish. Orłowicz calculated that the town had approximately 2,500 inhabitants, of whom forty percent were Jews and sixty percent Poles. Thanks to Krzysztof Persak for advising me of these publications.

8. Information of the Jedwabne *raion* NKVD Office of September 16, 1940, and "Short description of the Białystok District towns and rayons" [n.d., 1940], quoted by Musiał, "Tezy dotyczące pogromu w Jedwabnem," p. 267

9. Rossino, "Polish 'Neighbors' and German Invaders."

10. See *ibid.*, and Tomasz Szarota, "Debata narodowa o Jedwabnem," *Więź* 4 (2001), p. 40. The Jedwabne and Łomża region belonged to the Białystok province.

11. A Jewish woman testifying in Israel in 1960 for a West German trial recognized SS-Obersturmführer Herman Schapper as the commander in Radziłów; see Rossino, "Polish 'Neighbors' and German Invaders."

12. Gross, *Neighbors*, p. 78.

13. Gross, *Neighbors*, pp. 31–32. Although the late 1940s and early 1950s marked a high point of Stalin's anti-Jewish policies, Gross's argument that we may expect at the trial a downplaying of

Jewish wartime suffering is not entirely convincing. In Poland the political climate was such that during the late 1940s Jewish communists were visibly over-represented in key positions of the communist regime (including the Politburo and top Security echelons).

14. Relevant excerpts from the court protocols quoted by Tomasz Strzembosz, “Inny obraz sąsiadów,” *Rzeczpospolita*, April 31–May 1, 2001; and Musiał, “Tezy dotyczące pogromu w Jedwabnem,” p. 257.

15. Declared by the newly established Polish Committee of National Liberation (i.e., the communist authorities), its full name was the “Decree on the punishment of fascist-Hitlerite criminals guilty of murdering and persecuting civilians and prisoners, and of traitors to the Polish nation.”

16. During the trial, witnesses testified that Elias Grądowski had been deported and was absent from Jedwabne in 1941. He confirmed this himself in other documents; see Krzysztof Persak, “Akta postępowań cywilnych z lat 1947–1949 w sprawach dotyczących zmarłych żydowskich mieszkańców Jedwabnego,” in Machcewicz and Persak, eds., *Wokół Jedwabnego*. Similarly, as several witnesses including a Jewish survivor claimed, Boruszczak was absent.

17. Tomasz Strzembosz, “Inny obraz sąsiadów,” and “Zstąpienie szatana czy przyjazd Gestapo,” *Rzeczpospolita*, May 12–13, 2001 (quoted by Musiał, “Tezy dotyczące pogromu w Jedwabnem,” pp. 255–57, 265) offers convincing evidence on the unreliability of the testimonies.

18. Compare Wasersztajn’s account in Gross, *Neighbors*, p. 17, and Fogel’s in Julius L. Baker, ed., *Jedwabne: History and Memorial Book* (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 102.

19. The killing of almost all Jews in a single town does not meet the definition of genocide as established by Raphael Lemkin or as endorsed by the relevant U.N. convention. It certainly was part of a genocide, genocide in part, or a genocidal killing. On the definitions of genocide see Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, eds., *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 8–26.

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

21. Anna Landau-Czajka, *W jednym stali domu. Koncepcje rozwiązania kwestii żydowskiej w publicystyce polskiej lat 1933–1939* (Warsaw: Neriton, 1998); W. Mich, *Obcy w polskim domu. Nacjonalistyczne koncepcje rozwiązania problemu mniejszości narodowych, 1918–1939* (Lublin: UMCS, 1994).

22. Alina Cała, *The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture* (Jerusalem, 1995).

23. Jolanta Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie w Polsce w latach 1935–1937* (Warsaw: Neriton, 1993); Piotr Wróbel, “Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości,” in J. Tomaszewski, ed., *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów* (Warsaw: PWN, 1993), pp. 102–3.

24. Gross, *Neighbors*, p. 94.

25. Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999); see also Chalk and Jonassohn, eds., *The History and Sociology of Genocide*, and Helen Fein, *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective* (New York: Sage, 1993)

26. Relevant testimonies quoted by Tomasz Strzembosz, “Inny obraz sąsiadów.”

27. Gross, *Neighbors*, p. 120. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). Browning’s out-

standing book provides a relevant comparison to *Neighbors* in terms of the body of sources, methodology, and conclusions.

28. Ben-Cion Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews under Soviet Rule: Eastern Poland on the Eve of Holocaust* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Andrzej Żbikowski, "Jewish Reaction to the Soviet Arrival in the Kresy in September 1939," in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* XIII (2000). Jewish and Polish reactions to the Soviet entry are detailed in Marek Wierzbicki, *Polacy i Żydzi w zaborze sowieckim: Stosunki polsko-żydowskie na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II RP pod okupacją sowiecką, 1939–1941* (Warsaw: Fronda, 2001); Krystyna Kersten, *Polacy-Żydzi-komunizm: Anatomia półprawd, 1939–68* (Warsaw: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1992). One may also find accounts of Jews greeting the Red Army in Jan T. Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *W czterdziestym nas matko na Sybir zesłali: Polska a Rosja, 1393–1942* (Warsaw: Res Publica, 1989); Jan T. Gross, "Żydzi polscy pod panowaniem sowieckim w przededniu Holocaustu," in Daniel Grinberg, ed., *Holocaust z perspektywy półwiecza* (Warsaw: ŻIH, 1993); and Gross, *Revolution from Abroad*.

29. I believe that the crimes in the Jedwabne region were exceptional. 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 and 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 scope to that in the Jedwabne region.

30. Such cases are described by Tomasz Szarota, *U progu Zagłady: Zajścia antyżydowskie i pogromy w okupowanej Europie* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2000).