

Jan Gross' challenge on comfortable Polish  
self-definitions

Vera Petkantchin

HST 027

Prof. Craig Pepin

April 02, 2004

Jan Gross' book "Neighbors" dethrones several myths: first, the myth that there was widespread Jewish collaboration with the NKVD during the two-year Soviet occupation of Poland; second, the myth that the German Nazis hold the "exclusive rights" to the initiation and implementation of the Holocaust; third, and most important, the myth of Poland's national self-image as the martyr-nation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Judging by the raucous response the book received in the Polish public space, many people found it difficult to swallow.

The main purpose of the book is to shed light over the Jedwabne massacre in July 1941, in which all of the town's Jewish population was mercilessly and particularly cruelly eradicated. Based on various sources of evidence, Gross claims that, contrary to the widespread portrayal of the massacre, the perpetrators were not the Germans, but the other half of Jedwabne's population – ordinary Polish peasants who had been living door to door with their Jewish neighbors for decades.

Gross refuses to justify the massacre, but he offers some reasons which would make it possible to conceive the driving motives behind it. First, he argues, the period of Soviet occupation from 1939 until 1941 was crucial because of the suffering it inflicted upon Poles and the climate of general demoralization it created. The "brunt of propaganda and Soviet repression was directed against the Polish state. Local elites were arrested or deported. Private property was gradually taken over by the Soviet authorities. A vigorous campaign of secularization targeted all religious institutions and personnel" (Neighbors 30-31). Added to this was the belief (false, according to Gross) that Jews were acting especially enthusiastically as collaborators to the NKVD after the Soviet invasion and that they welcomed Communism.

A second reason Gross gives is the economic envy that Poles felt toward Jews. He believes that “the desire and unexpected opportunity to rob the Jews once and for all” (Neighbors 69) was the real motivator, more forceful even than “atavistic anti-Semitism” (Neighbors 69). It must be noted that before the war all evidence clearly points to peaceful relations and entirely smooth co-existence between Jews and Poles. Among Poles, however, there had always been a feeling that the mere fact of Jews carrying out the trade and business, owning all the shops, and therefore all the money, is an injustice that has to be rectified.

Further impetus was provided by long-lasting religious prejudices against Jews, such as the accusation that they are the murderers of Jesus Christ or the common belief that they use the fresh blood of Christian children for the preparation of Passover bread. A reactionary clergy was instrumental in constantly reinforcing these prejudices.

The war itself was another reason, because the “brutalization of interpersonal relations” (Neighbors 109) it brought about made it possible for individuals to cross that psychological threshold which under normal circumstances prevents people from conceiving the possibility of committing such a bestial murder.

It is fair to mention another possible cause which somehow remains unexplored in Gross’ narrative. It is highly probable that Poles were afraid of German vindication if they did not provide them with information about their Jewish neighbors and their hiding places. This alone is hardly a sufficient motivator to kill them, but opens up the question of the role of the Germans.

Indeed, much of the debate over the credibility of Gross’ account has centered around the role played by German soldiers. The overall credibility of the story, especially

the Polish participation in the murdering, has been hotly contested. Jan Gross' approach to the evidence has been called "post-modern" and "subjectivist" (Zakowski, "Every Neighbor Has A Name"). There is no definitive way of establishing the actual truth of the massacre. Post-modern subjectivism and the power of testimony to change reality is exactly Gross' point (Neighbors 92) when he claims that a new approach should be adopted towards the interpretation of evidence – presuming its authenticity rather than treating it with initial skepticism would bear more fruitful results and avoid many mistakes. More importantly, the exact numbers of Polish perpetrators, the exact involvement of Germans, even the exact number of Jewish victims are not as relevant as the poignant questions of how such an event is treated once it has happened, of how necessary a redefinition of Polish wartime past is, and of how to distinguish between personal and collective responsibility. The true significance of the book lies in asking these questions in public by introducing the testimony of the massacre.

The evidence of cases of collaboration with both Nazis and Soviets by people who have always been proud of their record of unflinching resistance to occupators shatters the "symbolism of collective, national martyrology during the Second World War" which is "paramount for the self-understanding of Polish society in the twentieth century" (Gross, 2002: 109). More pervasive and disturbing, however, is the questioning of Poland's record of religious tolerance, which dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Precisely due to that tolerance it became a haven for the second-largest Jewish community in Europe. Jews considered themselves a part of the Polish nation. The Polish willing participation in the massacre in Jedwabne enforces a fundamental re-examination of Polish-Jewish relations. Re-assessment of history is never comfortable but always necessary. Accepting

guilt and apologizing for a wrong, even if they are not entirely convinced they have committed it, will change Poles' perception of themselves as a nation but it will have a profoundly rejuvenating, consolidating, and reasserting effect on their identity. Facing an issue rather than avoiding it is the necessary remedy.

Apart from shifting the focus in Polish-Jewish relations by acknowledging Poland's own Holocaust, "Neighbors" introduces another reassessment of responsibility in terms of the dichotomy individual/collective. Gross' call for attributing a collective responsibility to the whole nation echoes of Communist ideology, especially in an age that has concentrated all of its efforts on proving the importance of individuality in all its aspects. A palpable counterargument is: why are we eager to view the achievements of individuals as a source of national pride and very much "our" own, but are reluctant to accept the shame of individual failure as "our" shame, too? Accepting the success of individuals as the nation's success is one way of making sure the nation will re-create and perpetuate itself every time such a success occurs. It must logically follow that admitting collective guilt for individual crimes, thereby embedding the knowledge of the repulsiveness of such acts in national collective consciousness, will be a way of insulating the nation from letting them happen again.

Jan Gross' book is remarkable, because it increases the awareness that history does not forgive the deliberate refusal to acknowledge mistakes, and urges re-definitions that are not easy. In the face of collective memory-distortion they acquire special importance for the cohesion of the Polish nation.

## Works Cited

Gross, Jan T. "Comprehensible" Murder?". Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne. 25-26 Nov. 2000. *Wież*. 31 Mar. 2004 <<http://free.ngo.pl/wiez/jedwabne/main.html>>.

Gross, Jan T. Neighbors. Penguin Press, 2002.

Kaczynski, Andrzej. "Burning Alive". Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne. 5 May 2000. *Wież*. 31 Mar. 2004 <<http://free.ngo.pl/wiez/jedwabne/main.html>>.

"We Are Different People: A Discussion About Jedwabne in Jedwabne." We Are a Different People: The Neighbors Respond Princeton. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000. 186-199.

Wroniszewska, Danuta, and Aleksander Wroniszewski. "To Survive". Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne. 10 July 1988. *Wież*. 31 Mar. 2004 <<http://free.ngo.pl/wiez/jedwabne/main.html>>.

Zakowski, Jacek. "Every Neighbor Has A Name". Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne. 18-19 Nov. 2000. *Wież*. 31 Mar. 2004 <<http://free.ngo.pl/wiez/jedwabne/main.html>>.