

Poles, Jews and the Problems of a Divided Memory

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‘We were taught as children’ – I was told by a seventy-year old Pole – ‘that we Poles never harmed anyone. A partial abandonment of this morally comfortable position is very, very difficult for me.’

Helga Hirsch, a German journalist in *Polityka*, 24 February 2001

The complex and often acrimonious debate about the character and significance of the massacre of the Jewish population of the small Polish town of Jedwabne in the summer of 1941, provoked by the publication of Jan Gross’s *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, 2000) and its English translation *Neighbors: the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (Princeton University Press, 2001) is part of a much wider argument about the totalitarian experience of Europe in the twentieth century. This controversy reflects the growing preoccupation with the issue of collective memory, which, Henri Rousso has characterized as a central ‘value’ reflecting the spirit of our timeⁱ. One key element in the understanding of collective memory is the ‘the dark past’ of nations – those aspects of the national past which provoke shame, guilt and regret - which needs to be integrated into the national collective identity, which itself is continually being reformulated.ⁱⁱ In this sense, memory has to be understood as a public discourse which helps to build group identity and which is inevitably entangled in

a relationship of mutual dependence with other identity-building processes. As John Gillis has written, 'The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity.'ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently, memory cannot be seen as static and unchanging. Rather, it is a representation of past reality, revised and modified according to the changing demands of present-day identity, something which is itself subject to modification.^{iv}

The retrieval of the 'dark side of the past' is further complicated by a problem which has been highlighted in the work of Franklin Ankersmit,^v who maintains that the only point when the past truly exposes itself to us is at the moment of trauma, which causes shock and pain. Trauma causes our convictions, categories and expectations to shatter and history is composed of traumatic collective experiences. The 'traumatic past' is not a record of past events but rather of the impact of experiences which cannot be assimilated or accepted. It has a paradoxical character because it can neither be forgotten nor remembered. 'Normal' history can be acquired, adopted, domesticated - traumatic history cannot. The traumatic past, whether private or national, exists within like a foreign body of which we cannot rid ourselves. Yet, at the same time, there is a marked disinclination to confront these painful memories. Ankersmit argues that the only way of coping with such traumas is to accept that there is a conflict between different memories of the past. The discourse of the historian, which, he claims, merely examines the past but does not try to explore or penetrate it, must be replaced by that of traumatic memory.

Central to the recovery and understanding of the 'dark past' have been the debates which have taken place in many countries in Europe about the totalitarian experience in

the twentieth century and, in particular, the origins and character of the genocide which the Nazis attempted to inflict on the Jewish people during the Second World War. These debates have only been possible in situations where the political culture has permitted a public reckoning with the more dubious aspects of the national past and where there is a high level of acceptance of the practice of national self-criticism.^{vi} Not surprisingly, they have gone furthest in Germany, first in the Federal Republic and subsequently in the united Germany which was established in 1989. Starting with the controversy over Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War aroused by publication of Fritz Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* in 1961, German historians have undertaken a thorough and complex re-examination of their country's past, which culminated in the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s and the debate over Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. This has greatly clarified the problems of how the Nazis came to power, the nature of the regime they established and how they came to adopt and implement their anti-Jewish genocide. Yet, even here, the difference in the political experience of Western and Eastern Germany has not been easily overcome and today, fifteen years after unification, a significantly different memory of the past and a nostalgia for some aspects of the former Germany Democratic Republic is a feature of the political culture of the former eastern Laender.

A similar wide-ranging debate also developed in France, although it started somewhat later, over the character of the Vichy regime, the nature of the antisemitic policies it implemented and its responsibility for the deaths of perhaps a quarter of French Jews in the Holocaust. Analogous attempts to 'overcome the past' have been undertaken

in Austria, Switzerland and elsewhere in Western and Central Europe, although the extent to which they have modified attitudes may be questioned.

The question of the responsibility of the local populations for the fate of the Jews in the Nazi genocide in East-central Europe only began to be seriously discussed after the collapse of communism in the area in 1989-1991. This was the case both in the states which during the Second World War were allied with the Nazis and in those occupied areas where no state-level collaborationist regimes were established by the Nazis, as in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. Since then there has been considerable dispute in Romania about the role of General Ion Antonescu and in Slovakia of Father Tiso and of the conduct of the Nazi satellite regimes in Hungary and Croatia. There has also been a good deal of debate in Lithuania and Latvia and rather less in Ukraine, about the participation of local militias in the mass murder of Jews.

Indeed, it could be argued that it was just the absence of such a debate over the Yugoslav experience during the Second World War which made the second South Slav civil war, which erupted in the nineties so violent and brutal. In Russia and Ukraine, it has proved even more difficult to 'overcome the past' and nostalgia for the Soviet Union and for the Stalinist system is a potent force here, particularly in Russia.

The debate in Poland goes back somewhat further than in her neighboring countries. Poland, home of the largest Jewish community in Europe in 1939, was one of the principal areas where the Nazis attempted to carry out their planned genocide of European Jewry. It was here that the principal death camps were established and that Jews were brought from all over Nazi-occupied Europe to be gassed, above all in Auschwitz, where probably one million lost their lives in this way. Over ninety per cent

of Polish Jews perished in the Holocaust, a death rate exceeded only in the Baltic states. Of the 3.5 million Jews in Poland on the eve of the Second World War, barely 350,000 survived the war, the large majority by fleeing or being deported to the interior of the Soviet Union.

There is no more controversial topic in the history of the Jews in Poland than the question of the degree of accountability borne by Polish society for fact that such a small proportion of Polish Jewry escaped the Nazi mass murderers. The primary responsibility for this clearly lies with the Nazis. The genocide was carried out in three stages. Its initiation was part of the radicalization of Nazi policy which accompanied Operation Barbarossa, the planned conquest of the USSR, and its final adoption accompanied the euphoria of victory in September and October 1941. In the first, mobile killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*, advanced behind the *Wehrmacht*, killing Soviet officials and first Jewish adult men and then, after a period, also Jewish women and children. At least one million Jews were killed in this way between July and December 1941. This method of murder was abandoned because of its deleterious effect on the morale of those required to carry it out. It was replaced, in the second stage, by the creation of death camps, where assembly line techniques of mass murder were developed using first carbon monoxide and then an insecticide, Zyklon B. During this period of the genocide, which came to an end in late 1942, the Germans were operating in areas where there was no limitation on their absolute freedom of action, when their power was at its height and the ability of the Allies or the subject populations under the control of the Third Reich to exercise influence on their behaviour was minimal. Most of the actual genocide was also at this stage carried out by Germans. It was during this period that at least another 2.7 million

Jews were murdered. Most of them came from within the pre-1939 borders of Poland and by the end of 1942 very few Polish Jews survived. In the third stage of the genocide, which lasted until the end of the war, the Nazis found themselves obliged to persuade or coerce their allies, satellites and puppets in the New Europe to hand over their Jews. By this time, both these governments, the Western Allies and virtually everybody else in Nazi-occupied Europe knew that Nazi policy towards the Jews involved genocide and were obliged to articulate some sort of response. However, by now very few Polish Jews survived.

The recognition of the primarily role of the Germans in the genocide has not prevented bitter arguments over Polish behaviour during the Second World War. This is a debate similar to those which have taken place in many countries in Europe about the origins and character of the genocide which the Nazis attempted to inflict on the Jewish people during the Second World War. Even as the war ended, Jews harshly criticized what they have seen as Polish indifference to the fate of the Jews and the willingness of a minority to aid the Nazis or to take advantage of the new conditions to profit at Jewish expense. According to Mordekhai Tenenbaum, Commander of the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Białystok ghetto, in his memoirs, published shortly after the war:

If it had not been for the Poles, for their aid - passive and active - in the 'solution' of the Jewish problem in Poland, the Germans would never have dared to do what they did. It was they, the Poles, who called out 'Yid' at every Jew who escaped from the train transporting him, it was they who caught the unfortunate wretches, who rejoiced at every Jewish misfortune - they were vile and contemptible.^{vii}
A somewhat more moderate but still strongly critical view was expressed by

Emanuel Ringelblum in his *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War* written in hiding on the 'Aryan' side in 1944:

The Polish people and the Government of the Republic of Poland were incapable of deflecting the Nazi steam-roller from its anti-Jewish course. But the question is permissible whether the attitude of the Polish people befitted the enormity of the calamities that befall the country's citizens. Was it inevitable that the Jews, looking their last on this world as they rode in the death trains speeding from different parts of the country to Treblinka or other places of slaughter, should have to see indifference or even gladness on the faces of their neighbours? Last summer, when carts packed with captive Jewish men, women and children moved through the streets of the capital, did there really need to be laughter from the wild mobs resounding from the other side of the ghetto walls, did there really have to prevail such blank indifference in the face of the greatest tragedy of all time?^{viii}

This view is echoed in the most important scholarly investigation of the problem, that by Yisrael Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski^{ix}, and is shared by the doyen of Holocaust historians, Yehuda Bauer. He has written:

The majority of Poles evinced an indifference, often rather hostile, to the fate of the Jews, expressed in a lack of basic human interest in their fate. A fairly large minority was actively hostile to the Jews, and a smaller minority was friendly and helpful...^x

Polish responses to these accusations have taken two forms: attempts to justify Polish behaviour and apologies for the failings of the Poles in this period. The most characteristic articulation of the apologetic point of view was set out by the late Władysław Siła-Nowicki, a prominent opposition lawyer and former resistance fighter. In an article 1987, he attacked those who argued that the Polish record during the Second World War in relation to the Jews should be strongly assailed. Such people were playing into the hands of Poland's enemies and lending credibility to 'anti-Polish propaganda'. He then rehearsed the familiar arguments that so many Poles have used to justify their behaviour towards Jews before, during and after the Holocaust. For centuries, he asserted, when they were expelled elsewhere, Jews were able to settle in Poland and their numbers increased remarkably. The hostility they aroused before 1939 was moderate considering their privileged position. They 'dominated' certain professions and

controlled a 'disproportionate part' of wealth in Poland. The pre-war quota on university admissions (the *numerus clausus*) for Jews was justified since 'it is natural for a society to defend itself against the numerical domination of its intelligentsia'. During the war, no European nation did more to assist Jews than Poland, where the risk of such assistance was the greatest, the normal penalty being death -- and death not only of the individual, but of his or her family as well. Polish suffering during the occupation was enormous, second only to that of the Jews. There were, he argued, no quislings in Poland, and the Polish underground sentenced to death those who betrayed Jews to the Nazis. It was the passivity of the Jews, more than anything else, that led to their destruction. Habits of accommodation, presumably different from those of the rebellious, insurrectionary Poles, led them to go to their deaths without offering resistance. He concluded defiantly (and inconsistently):

I am proud of my nation's stance in every respect during the period of occupation and in this I include the attitude towards the tragedy of the Jewish nation. Obviously, attitudes towards the Jews during that period do not give us a particular reason to be proud, but neither are they any grounds for shame, and even less for ignominy. Simply, we could have done relatively little more than we actually did.^{xi}

There have also been voices much more critical of Polish responses. Such views were articulated in the immediate post-war period, but communist cultural uniformity meant that they have been largely unheard until more recent years. Thus, in his contribution to a pamphlet denouncing antisemitism published in 1947, the Catholic writer, Jerzy Andrzejewski observed:

For all honest Poles, the fate of the perishing Jews was bound to be exceedingly painful, since the dying ... were people whom our people could not look straight in the face, with a clear conscience. The Polish nation could look straight in the face of Polish men and women who were dying for freedom. It could not do so in the face of the Jews dying in the burning ghetto.^{xiii}

A similar point of view was expressed by Jan Błoński. In his article, 'The Poor Poles look at the Ghetto', published in 1987. Błoński observes that any attempt by Poles to discuss the Polish reactions to the Nazi anti-Jewish genocide, whether with Jews or with other people, very quickly degenerates into apologetics and attempts to justify Polish conduct. The reason for this, he claims, is the Poles' fear, conscious or unconscious, of themselves being accused either of participation in this genocide or, at best, of observing it with acquiescence. This fear cannot be easily evaded, even if it is shared by the Poles with the rest of Europe. The only way to deal with it, he asserted, is for the Poles to 'stop haggling, trying to defend and justify ourselves. To stop arguing about the things that were beyond our power to do, during the occupation and beforehand. Nor to place blame on political, social and economic conditions. But to say first of all, 'Yes, we are guilty'.'

This guilt does not consist, in his view, in involvement in the mass murder of the Jews, in which he claims the Poles did not participate significantly. It has two aspects. First, there is the Poles 'insufficient effort to resist', their 'holding back' from offering help to the Jews. This was the consequence of the second aspect, that the Poles had not in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created conditions in which the Jews could be integrated into the Polish national community.

If only we had behaved more humanely in the past, had been wiser, more generous, then genocide would perhaps have been 'less imaginable', would probably have been considerably more difficult to carry out, and almost certainly would have met with much greater resistance than it did. To put it differently, it would not have met with the indifference and moral turpitude of the society in whose full view it took place.^{xiii}

The parameters of the debate in Poland in the nineties seemed to have been set by Siła-Nowicki and the Błoński. Indeed, that decade saw a series of set-piece debates similar to that aroused by Błonski's article, among them one initiated by the publication

in the main Polish daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 29/30 January 1994 of an article by a young (non-Jewish) historian Michal Cichy discussing anti-Jewish attitudes and actions the part of Polish military organisations and civilian population during the sixty-three day Warsaw Uprising, another provoked by the exchange in the pages of *Tygodnik Powszechny* in late 1997 between Fathers Musial and Chrostowski on the reaction of the Polish hierarchy to the antisemitic utterances of Father Jankowski and a third stimulated by an article 'The Disgrace of Indifference' by the sociologist Hanna Świda-Ziemia, which appeared in *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 17 August 1998 and which repeated in sharper form the arguments set out by Blonski.

What is striking about these debates is their moral character. It is no accident that several of them took place in a Catholic periodical. They are mostly conducted by theologians, philosophers and literary critics. This is why Jerzy Turowicz, the veteran editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, who died in 1998 found it necessary to point out that the argument between the two sides was 'conducted on totally different planes'.

At the same time, two new developments stimulated a more fundamental rethinking of attitudes towards Jews and the 'Jewish Question', the large mass of new historical material which has provided a much fuller picture of Polish-Jewish relations in the twentieth century and the emergence of a new generation of Polish-Jewish writers, who have brought a new and unique voice to the debate. From the new research, a clear and unambiguous picture is emerging. This was set out in an important review article by Maria Janion in *Tygodnik Powszechny* on 22 October 2000. She points out that although Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* has many flaws, his concept of 'eliminationist antisemitism' is a useful analytical tool. She argues that there are several

stages before a society adopts such a stance: Jews are first seen as undesirable and to be denied some rights; then comes a demand for the voluntary or compulsory removal of the bulk of Jews from the society; only then does the move to mass murder occur. Janion argues persuasively that the majority of Polish society and of Polish political parties had come by the 1930s to the position that the ‘solution’ of the ‘Jewish problem’ was the voluntary or compulsory removal of most Jews from Poland. These difficult conclusions were increasingly incorporated into the scholarly consensus in Poland in the 1990s.

A second important development was the emergence of a some new Polish-Jewish writers and the more widespread distribution in Poland of the works of already established Polish-Jewish authors. The nineties were marked by an outburst of creativity by Hanna Krall and Henryk Grynberg and the publication of important new writers, such as Wilhelm Dichter and works by authors, like Michal Glowinski, which dealt extensively with their previously concealed Jewish backgrounds. All had a common background in that they experienced the war as children hidden on the ‘Aryan’ side, and grew up in the complex post-war years. Their work gave a graphic and largely negative picture of what it was like to be a Jew in a hostile environment both during the war and under communism.

This is the context for the debate provoked by the publication of Jan Gross’s *Neighbors*, first published as *Sasiedzi: Historia zaglady zydowskiego miasteczka* (Neighbours, The History of the Destruction of a Jewish Shtetl, Sejny, 2000). The book describes, in detail, in the basis of evidence produced for a trial in 1949 an incident in the town of Jedwabne in the north-east of today’s Poland in which, with some German incitement, but little actual assistance, the local population brutally murdered the

overwhelming majority of their Jewish neighbours. Almost the entire Jewish population plus many Jewish refugees from other localities were driven out of their homes and herded at the market place. Many were beaten to death with poles, brooms and axes. Some were murdered at the Jewish cemetery. The vast majority (at least 700) was forced into a barn standing near to the cemetery, which was then set on fire burning those inside alive.

The debate on Jedwabne has been the most serious, protracted and profound on the issue of Polish-Jewish relations since the end of the war. Certainly the responses of the Polish President, Alexander Kwasniewski, the then Prime Minister, Jerzy Buzek and the then Foreign Minister, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, have been entirely appropriate given the seriousness of the moral problems involved. The actions of the government in removing the monument which attributed the massacre to the Germans and proposing to replace it with a more appropriate one, accompanied by a suitable ceremony have also been impressive. The responses of the political leaders differ somewhat in tone, from Bartoszewski's explanation to an American audience of the steps that will be taken to investigate the massacre in Jedwabne and commemorate it, to Kwaśniewski's moving attempt to come to terms with the difficult truth. At the commemoration service, held in Jedwabne on the sixtieth anniversary of the massacre, Kwaśniewski observed:

We express our pain and shame, we give expression to our determination in seeking to learn the truth, our courage in overcoming an evil past, our unbending will for understanding and harmony. Because of this crime we should beg the shadows of the dead and their families for forgiveness. Therefore, today, as a citizen and as the President of the Polish Republic, I apologize. I apologize in the name of those Poles whose conscience is moved by that crime.

The Church has been more equivocal. In particular, Cardinal Glemp, the Primate of the Polish Roman Catholic Church has failed to give a clear lead. Although he acknowledged the

seriousness of what had happened in Jedwabne in a statement on 4 March 2001, on 14 May of that year, after promising that the church would apologize for wrongs to Jews he asked rhetorically ‘We wonder if Jews shouldn’t recognize their own guilt toward the Poles -- particularly for cooperating with Bolsheviks, sending Poles to prison and degrading so many of their fellow citizens.’ Some other members of the hierarchy expressed more contrition. Thus, Archbishop Muszynski in an interview with *Tygodnik Powszechny* of 25 March 2001, admitted that ‘some Polish residents of Jedwabne’ were ‘direct perpetrators of the crime’ [the words of the interviewer] and went on to say:

For any crime, it is the direct perpetrator who is answerable; but those who are connected to him by religious or national ties—though they bear no personal guilt—cannot feel themselves to be free of moral responsibility for the victims of this murder.

He referred to the removal of the old monument in Jedwabne as ‘symbolic of the beginning of the end of the era of falsification, instrumentalization, and the ideologizing of the truth.’ For this process to continue, Poles, like the Pope, would have to ask for forgiveness for ‘wrongdoing and sins against the Jews.’ This should take the form of joint participation with Jews in a ‘community of prayer.’

Although this prayer service took place on 27 May 2001 without Jewish participation (the diplomatic excuse was that it was on the first day of Shavuot, but the real reason was irritation at the behaviour of the Primate) and in the Church of All Saints in central Warsaw, where antisemitic literature was prominently displayed, it turned out much better than could have been anticipated. The church was packed with worshipers and most of Poland’s bishops were also present. Speaking on behalf of the Church, Bishop Stanislaw Gądecki said that the Jews were victims of a crime and that there had been ‘Poles and Catholics’ among the perpetrators. ‘We are deeply disturbed by the

actions of those who caused Jews to suffer and even murdered them in Jedwabne and in other places over the ages.’ Among the biblical readings were the story of Cain and Abel and the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Bishops also prayed for peace in the Middle East. The service concluded with the Primate praying for the Jewish nation (narod):

God of Abraham, God of the Prophets, God of Jesus Christ, all is contained in You, all is directed towards You, You are the limit of everything. Hear our prayers on behalf of the Jewish nation—which, because of its forefathers—is still very dear to you.

Arouse in this nation unceasingly an ever more lively desire to deepen Your truth and Your love. Aid it, so that in achieving truth and justice, it may reveal to the world the power of Your blessing.

Support it that it may receive the respect and love of all those who do not yet understand the great sufferings that it has undergone, so that they may feel in solidarity a sense of common concern and feel together the wounds that it has suffered. Remember its new generations of young people and children so that they may remain unchangingly true to You, upholding the particular secret of their mission. Strengthen all generations so that thanks to their testimony, humanity will understand that your redeeming intention encompasses all people and that You, O God, are for all nations the beginning and final goal.

How far has Polish society followed the lead given, even if not entirely clearly, by its elites? In an article that appeared in late April 2001 in the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, the historian Andrzej Paczkowski sketched out a tentative typology of the discussion which, as he rightly observed, concerned less the events as such than the ‘range, intensity and nature of Polish antisemitism.’ He identified four categories: first, the ‘affirmative,’ which upholds Gross’s basic premises, and is particularly concerned about their moral ramifications; second, the ‘defensive open’ genre, which accepts some of Gross’s conclusions, but raises questions about his research priorities and methods, and stresses in particular the supposedly still vague nature of German participation in the atrocity; third, the ‘defensive closed’ which generally portrays some Poles as, at worst,

unwitting helpers of the Nazis, or as motivated largely by a desire to retaliate for the various wrongs perpetrated against them by the Jews (an overwhelming number of them, presumably) who worked for the Soviet forces and Soviet secret police in 1939-41; finally, the letters and articles aiming to refute Gross's book *tout court*, in the process often resorting to old stereotypes, from deicide to mounting perfidious conspiracies against Poland.

It is difficult to decide how Polish opinion is divided between these four categories. In a public opinion poll held in early April 2001, 48 percent of those polled did not believe that Poles should apologise to the 'Jewish nation' for the crime of Jedwabne. 30 percent were for an apology. 80 percent did not feel – as Poles- any moral responsibility for Jedwabne, while only 13 percent felt such a responsibility. 34 percent believed that the Germans were solely responsible for the crime, 14 percent that Germans and Poles were responsible., 7 percent believed that Poles were solely responsible.

An opinion poll conducted in August 2001, after the Memorial Service and the extensive television coverage of the massacre, showed only small changes in attitude. 28 percent of respondents still believed that the Germans/Nazis were solely responsible for the massacre of Jedwabne Jews: 12 percent claimed that a few Poles together with the Germans participated in the massacre; 4 percent stated that Poles forced by the Germans committed the massacre; 8 percent stated that only Poles were responsible for the massacre. 30 percent were not able to say who was responsible for the murder.

Even after the publication of the report of the Institute for National Memory in October 2002, 50 percent of those polled were unable to say who was responsible for the massacre. This answer was most frequently given by people without higher education,

among those who lived in the countryside or who declared they had no interest in politics. Three percent held that the murders had been committed by the local Polish population without the participation of the Germans; 17 percent held that those responsible were the local Poles incited by Germans; 28 percent Germans with the help of Poles; 34 percent by Poles compelled to do so by Germans and 18 percent by Germans without Polish help. Asked what sort of Poles participated in the massacre, 50 percent responded 'ordinary people, like everyone else' while 32 percent believed that they were 'marginal people'. 83 percent held that it was good that the crime at Jedwabne had been brought to light. 40 percent approved of the President's apology, 35 percent disapproved. 44 percent thought such an apology necessary against 35 percent who did not. The body which carried out this poll (OBOP) concluded 'Those who refuse to acknowledge guilt for Jedwabne are primarily older people, those with less education, who live in the countryside and in small towns. Those who are in favour of such an acknowledgment are mostly younger, more educated and town-dwellers'. It may be that, as in Germany, the long term impact of the controversy will be very different from its first reception as is suggested by this last poll.

The actual historical disputes can be summed up under three headings. Firstly there are the disagreements about what actually happened in Jedwabne between the collapse of Soviet rule in late June and the final massacre of 10 July 1941. Secondly there are differing views about the context of the massacre. Finally there are arguments over its larger significance. The controversies about what happened in Jedwabne revolve around a number of questions. How many Jews were murdered? How many Poles took part? How much German incitement and involvement was there? These issues have arisen constantly throughout this volume and one of the main problems in resolving them is the

difficulty of reconstructing an event over sixty years later when there are only imperfect records and when, in addition, given the criminal character of what occurred, there are great incentives to dissemble. Certainly Gross was compelled in his work to rely on a narrow range of sources and, in spite of great efforts, the source base for reconstructing the events in Jedwabne has not been greatly enlarged since the publication of the Polish edition of *Neighbors*.

The problem of how to reconstruct what actually occurred in Jedwabne is well dealt with in a recent article by Dariusz Stola. He argues that the massacre has to be understood in the context of the collaborationist authority established by the Germans in Jedwabne. The initiative for the massacre clearly came from the Germans, but they were probably not present in large numbers and do not seem to have participated actively. The existence of a collaborationist town council made the implementation of the massacre easier and meant that it could be carried out by a core of what Stola, following Goldhagen, describes as 'willing executioners'. They had the tacit support of the bulk of the townspeople and very few had the civic courage to oppose them. He argues that the number of Jewish victims in his estimate is closer to 600 than 1500. (Although this does not affect the moral issue, it is important to try and reach as accurate an assessment of this figure as possible. In this context it is unfortunate that the exhumation carried out was so brief and unsatisfactory).

In the controversy about the context of the massacre, two key points are in dispute – how strong was antisemitism in interwar Poland and how significant was the effect of Soviet occupation in inflaming Polish-Jewish relations. The intensity of anti-Jewish feeling in interwar Poland remains a matter of controversy and the different positions

adopted in the Jedwabne controversy echo earlier disputes which I have already discussed. Here, a pessimistic conclusion seems justified. As Jerzy Jedlicki puts it:

Poland was unquestionably one of the countries most affected by the [antisemitic] obsession. Its ideological leaders never ceased developing ideas to deprive millions of Polish citizens of their rights and property and banish them from the country. The only groups to actively oppose such ideas were the socialists and communists and the liberal fraction of the intelligentsia, which explains the inclinations of assimilating Jews to seek refuge and support in these circles that did not treat them with aggression and contempt.^{xiv}

These developments inevitably affected the situation in Jedwabne located in one of the most strongly nationalist parts of Poland. Jan Błoński, in his article 'The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto' wrote:

... when one reads what was written about Jews before the war, when one discovers how much hatred there was in Polish society, one can only be surprised that words were not followed by deeds. But they were not (or very rarely).^{xv}

Jedwabne turned out to be one of these exceptions.

The impact of the twenty-two months of Soviet occupation of former eastern Poland in exacerbating Polish-Jewish relations and creating the climate in which the massacre was possible has been stressed by many participants. Certainly the Soviet occupation created divergent interests between Poles and Jews. The Poles saw themselves as confronted by two enemies, the Nazis and the Soviets, and Polish diplomacy and underground strategy was dominated from the time of the Polish defeat in September 1939 by the aim of ensuring the re-emergence of Poland as an independent state within its pre-war frontiers. The Poles totally rejected the incorporation into the Soviet Union of what were described as Western Belarus and Western Ukraine and attempted to organise resistance to the brutal methods adopted by the Soviets to ensure the permanence of their control of their new territorial acquisitions. For the Jews, the

Soviets were a lesser evil than the Nazis, whose anti-Jewish policies were all too well-known. They did not, by and large, accept Polish strategic thinking and were prepared to accept as permanent the new territorial arrangements in the multi-ethnic eastern Kresy, something which obviously had a seriously adverse effect on Polish-Jewish relations in the area.

In addition, Jewish 'collaboration' with the new Soviet authorities aroused widespread Polish resentment. It is undeniable that a fair number of Jews (like the overwhelming majority of Belarussians, a considerable number of Ukrainians and even some Poles) welcomed the establishment of Soviet rule. In the Jewish case, this welcome was natural: a desire to see an end to the insecurity caused by the collapse of Polish rule in these areas and the belief that the Soviets were less hostile than the Nazis, resentment at Polish anti-Jewish policies in the interwar period. There was in addition some support for the communist system, although this was very much a minority position within the Jewish community. While the Soviets did offer new opportunities to individual Jews, they acted to suppress organized Jewish life, both religious and political, dissolving *kehillot*, banning virtually all Jewish parties and arresting their leaders. Jews made up nearly a third of the over half a million people deported (and in many cases thereby saved) by the Soviets from these areas. Under these conditions, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population here very quickly lost whatever illusions they had about the Soviet system.

This was not how most Poles saw the situation. They were affronted by Jewish behavior in 1939, probably exaggerated Jewish participation in the new system because a Jewish presence in the apparatus of government was so unprecedented in Poland and

accused the Jews of disloyalty and treason in a moment of national crisis. It is clear that more research needs to be done on the impact of Soviet rule in the Jedwabne area. Yet what is obvious is that the widespread acceptance of the stereotype of the pro-Soviet and anti-Polish Jew greatly widened the gulf between the two communities. This stereotype, embodied in the Polish concept of 'Żydokomuna' (Judeo-communism) had a long history on the Polish lands, going back to Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz's 1817 dystopia, *The Year 3333*, which described a Warsaw of the future renamed Moszkopolis, after its Jewish ruler, which had been taken over by a mafia of superficially Europeanised Jews. It was given a new lease of life by the Bolshevik revolution. Many Poles felt directly threatened both by the prospect of revolution and by Russian imperialism in a new guise, which they saw embodied in the Soviet regime. The fact that Jews played a significant part both in the government of the USSR and in the illegal Polish Communist Party further strengthened the hold of this form of political paranoia, which was clearly apparent in during the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-20 and became a basic feature of the political discourse of the radical right in the nineteen thirties. It now seemed to have been confirmed by the events of 1939.

The problem of how to assess the implications of the Soviet occupation of Jedwabne on Polish-Jewish relations there is well summed up by Bencion Pinchuk:

The subject of 'Jewish-Soviet 'collaboration'' is as old as the Red Army's invasion of the Eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic on September 17, 1939. The sights and sounds of jubilant Jewish masses that met the advancing troops, expressing publicly their sense of relief and joy; the role played by Jewish communists and sympathizers in establishing the Soviet regime as well as taking up positions formerly held only by the ruling Poles – these were difficult to digest. It went contrary to what might be called the 'natural order' of things as perceived by the ordinary Pole. For twenty two months the traditional roles were at least partially reversed. Moreover, it occurred under Russian rule, the powerful historical enemy of the Poles. In the minds of Polish patriots there had to be some

sinister plot behind it. Equality of the Jew under the Soviet rulers was perceived as ‘collaboration’ if not actual treason on their part. In Polish memory this period of ‘unnatural’ relations with their Jewish neighbors remained an open sore. It was a score to be settled in due time.^{xvi}

The term ‘collaboration’ is a loaded one and is of questionable use in analyzing the complex question of the impact of Soviet occupation on the ethnically-mixed area of former eastern Poland. As Pinchuk has further written:

Between September 1939 and June 1941, the Soviet Union ruled the eastern provinces of Poland. The multi-ethnic population of the region had to adapt to the new rulers, to learn to live and survive under Soviet rule. In one way or another, when active fighting against the invaders ceased, the vast majority of the population accepted the new regime and in varying degrees ‘collaborated’ with the Soviet rulers. However, the use of the term ‘Collaboration’ in research is problematic at best and misleading at its worst. By its very use, it implies negative moral judgment, and comes pretty close to mean actual treason. Its use in research means a priori the assumption of an unwarranted moral superiority of the investigator and prejudgment of the subjects of his research. It is misleading rather than enlightening.^{xvii}

Finally, as even Gross’s critics admit, to use the alleged Jewish responsibility for the crimes of the Soviet Union to explain the massacre of women and children comes close to attempting to excuse murder.

The arguments over the larger significance of the massacre are concerned with three issues. Firstly there is the question of collective guilt. No sentence in *Neighbors* has aroused more controversy than the statement with which the book concludes: ‘...the 1,600 Jedwabne Jews were killed neither by the Nazis, nor by NKVD, nor by the UB...but by society.’^{xviii} This was widely taken as a statement of collective guilt. Thus Bogdan Musiał has observed:

If Gross had written that X or Y was responsible for these crimes that would be acceptable. However, he makes the society of Jedwabne, Polish society, responsible for this crime.^{xix}

However, this is an interpretation which cannot be sustained by a careful reading of the whole of the final paragraph of the Polish edition. Gross explained his intentions in an article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 25-26 November 2000. He points out that he led up to this paragraph by observing that Poland was no exception in Europe: ‘And like several other nations, in order to reclaim its own past, Poland will have to tell its past to itself anew.’. He continues, ‘After this assertion that the truth about our history in the period of the Second World War still remains to be written, comes the paragraph that reads thus’:

An appropriate memento is, of course, to be found in Jedwabne, where there are two monuments with inscriptions carved into the stone that will have to be chipped away in order to liberate the historical truth in them. One says simply that the Germans killed the Jews: ‘THE PLACE OF THE SUFFERING OF THE JEWISH POPULATION. THE GESTAPO AND THE NAZI GENDARMERIE BURNED 1600 PEOPLE ALIVE JULY 10, 1941.’ The other one, erected in a Poland that was already free, either implies that there were no Jews at all in Jedwabne-or else it bears witness, in spite of itself, to the crime that was committed: ‘TO THE MEMORY OF APPROXIMATELY 180 PERSONS INCLUDING TWO PRIESTS MURDERED IN THE TERRITORY OF JEDWABNE DISTRICT IN THE YEARS 1939-1956 BY THE NKVD, THE NAZIS, AND THE UB [signed:] SOCIETY’ For, in fact, the 1,600 Jedwabne Jews who are omitted here (even though they were ‘murdered in the community of Jedwabne in the years 1939-1956’) were not murdered by any Nazis or NKVD or UB, but rather by society.

The issue is thus the falsification of memory perpetrated by those who erected the two monuments, or in Gross’s words, ‘my point is that it is necessary to write the truth, because the truth will always out.’ He added, perhaps aware that his subtle observations risked being misunderstood:

On reflection, I nevertheless feel that the final word in the book ‘society’ should have been put in quotation marks, to make it immediately plain that it unconsciously reveals the truth hidden in the lies inscribed on the Jedwabne monuments.^{xx}

This still leaves the difficult question of the overall attitude of Polish society towards the Jewish genocide. On this issue, while rejecting the concept of collective guilt, Gross takes a rather strong line, highlighting the widespread antisemitism and the ‘general debasement of morality during the occupation.’^{xxi} Others have stressed rather the Poles’ widespread fear and indifference, and also examples of Polish aid to the Jews. We still lack a broad and nuanced picture of this important subject.

Gross also makes a number of challenging assertions. Thus, he claims:

...it is manifest that the local non-Jewish population enthusiastically greeted entering Wehrmacht units in 1941 and broadly engaged in collaboration with the Germans, up to and including participation in the exterminatory war against the Jews.^{xxii}

This is an important assertion and seems, at least partially, to be borne out by the researches of Martin Dean on Polish participation in German-organized police forces east of the Curzon line. He has shown that about half of those persons punished in Poland after the war for war crimes in the former Eastern Polish territories served as local policemen in the *Schutzmannschaft* (several hundred individuals, especially from the territory of modern Belarus). They are also partly confirmed by Shimon Redlich’s work on Berezhany and by Sarunas Liekis’s investigation of the three-way civil war in southern Lithuania between Poles, Lithuanians and Soviets.^{xxiii} But only further research will demonstrate how far it can be justified.

The same applies to Gross’s observation:

...in the process of the Communist takeover in Poland after the war, the natural allies of the Communist Party, on the local level, were people who had been compromised during the German occupation.^{xxiv}

This is an attempt to counteract the widespread view in Poland that the post-1944 regime was dominated by Jews. The participation of former Nazi sympathisers and

collaborators in the new communist government does seem to be borne out by some of the work of Padraic Kenney and Andrzej Paczkowski^{xxv}. But at present it is still no more than an interesting hypothesis.

More recently, the temperature of the debate seems to have cooled. One reason for the more sober nature of the discussion is the large mass of information which has been collected by investigative journalists and the more detailed investigations which have been undertaken by many historians. Another hopeful sign is the widespread trust in the Institute of National Memory, which issued its report in October of last year.

Another factor was the more nuanced understanding of the Polish situation in the Jewish world which the Jewabne revelations revealed. The reaction to the publication of Gross's book in English in 2002 did not fulfil the alarmist predictions of those who feared that it would lead to a widespread assumption in the Jewish world that the Poles were as guilty as the Germans for the mass murder of the Jews during the Second World War. On the contrary, there was considerable understanding in the Jewish world for way Poles reacted to the expose of the tragic events in Jewabne. The American Jewish Committee organized a delegation of Polish Americans and American Jews to attend the dedication of the monument in Jedwabne in July 2001. In the introduction to the pamphlet written by one member of this group, Professor Alvin Rosenfeld of Indiana University, David Harris, Executive Director of The American Jewish Committee, wrote:

The need to heal the wounds stretches from President Kwasniewski to the townspeople of Jedwabne and the surrounding villages and reaches around the world, where Polish and Jewish descendants seek paths to reconciliation.... Today, while Jedwabne is *judenrein*, remarkably Jewish life in other parts of Poland is beginning to stir. If the ghosts of the past are properly exhumed and courageously confronted—and, fortunately, there are a number of Poles dedicated

to this goal, with whom we collaborate closely—who knows if there will not be another glorious chapter in Jewish-Polish history ahead?

There was, it is true, an acrimonious correspondence in the *Times Literary Supplement* following Abraham Brumberg's review and which reflected some of the sentiments which the revelations of the Jedwabne massacre and the subsequent debate provoked among surviving Polish Jews. Most Jewish responses were more moderate. In Israel the tone was set by the introductions written by Israel Gutman and David Engel to the Hebrew edition of *Neighbors*. Gutman stressed the importance of coming to terms with the past and that it was not possible to hold all Poles responsible for the massacre. Engel, for his part, compared the debate to that provoked by the 'new historians' in Israel.

In America, the responses were similar. Samuel Kassow, writing in *Forwards* asserted:

In fairness, Jedwabne was more the exception than the rule. Indifference rather than murder best characterized Polish attitudes, and Poland still furnished more 'righteous gentiles' than any other occupied country. But the murder of Jews certainly created new and unforeseen opportunities for neighbors who were otherwise decent people.

The Jewish response was perhaps best summed up by Rabbi Baker, who left Jedwabne shortly before the war and who spoke movingly at the commemoration service of the long history of the Jews in the area. In his interview with Krzysztof Darewicz of *Rzeczpospolita* on 10 March 2001, he remarked:

The most important is that the silence has been interrupted. That you have begun to tell the truth about Jedwabne, for it was not possible to wait any longer. Of those Jews born in Jedwabne only a handful remain. But their families number in the thousands, maybe tens of thousands. They deserve that truth above all. But so do all Jews and all Poles also. For only on its basis, is it possible to build anew the friendship between us..

It was the eighteenth century French , Andre Rene Le Sage, who remarked that ‘facts are stubborn things’ and it would seem that it is the debate among historians, both Polish and Jewish, which offers the best chance to move forward. It is part of a general process, which has only really begun since the end of the communist system, of coming to terms with many neglected and taboo aspects of the Polish past. Among these are the history of Poles beyond the borders of present-day Poland, above all in the former Soviet Union, and relations between Poles and Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Germans and Russians. For too long, these topics have been the subject of much mythologization. The first stage of approaching such issues has to be from a moral point of view – a settlement of long-overdue accounts. It is because of its wider implications for all the countries of Europe and particularly for those in the North-east of the continent that the Jedwabne debate has been so significant.

Because of profound and serious character of this debate, one can hope that, in the case of Polish-Jewish relations, we are now beginning to enter a second stage, where apologies and apologetics will increasingly be replaced by careful and detailed research and reliable and nuanced first-hand testimony. It should be possible to move beyond strongly-held, competing and incompatible narratives of the past and reach some consensus which will be acceptable to all people of good will and which will bring about a degree of normalization both in Poles’ attitude to the past and in Polish-Jewish relations. Some have questioned whether normalization is a desirable or realizable goal. The past is too near and painful for that. Perhaps the aim should be for both Poles and Jews (insofar as these are mutually exclusive categories) to strive for a ‘tragic acceptance’ of those events which have united and, so often, divided them in the past

century. That, at least, is owed to the millions of victims of the totalitarian systems of the last century.

ⁱ Henry Rousso, *La hantise du passe: entetien avec Phillipe Petit*, Paris, Les Editions Textuels, 1998, 14. English translation, *The haunting past ; history, memory and justice in contemporary France*, Philadelphia, PA, 2002

ⁱⁱ The ‘dark past’ is a commonly used term in the studies of collective memory. Other similar terms are the ‘difficult past’ and the ‘troubling past’.

ⁱⁱⁱ John R. Gillis, ‘Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship’, in John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994), 3.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 3.

^v F. Ankersmit, ‘Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholia’ in P. Ahokas, M. Chard – Hutchinson (eds.) *Reclaiming Memory. American Representations of the Holocaust*, University of Turku Press, 1997

^{vi} The importance of the practice of self-criticism for the process of reckoning with the ‘dark past’ is raised by Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, New Brunswick and London, 1994. Hereafter Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames*.

^{vii} Mordekhai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Dapim min hadelekah*, Bet lohamei hageta’ot, hakibbutz hameuhad, 1947, 49-50.

^{viii} Emanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War*, edited and with footnotes by Joseph Kermish and Shmuel Krakowski, Evanston, Illinois, 1992, 7-8.

^{ix} Yisrael Gutman, Shmuel Krakowski, *Unequal Victims. Poles and Jews During World*

War Two, New York, 1968.

^xRingelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations* , xliv.

^{xi} Władysław Siła-Nowicki, ‘Janowi Błońskiemu w odpowiedzi’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 22 February 1987. For an English translation, see Antony Polonsky (ed.), *‘My Brother’s Keeper? Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, London 1990, 59-68.

^{xii} Jerzy Andrzejewski, ‘Zagadnienia polskiego antysemityzmu’, *Martwa fala* , Warsaw, 1947.

^{xiii} Jan Błoński, ‘Biedni Polacy patrzą na ghetto’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11 January 1987. For an English translation, see Antony Polonsky (ed.), *‘My Brother’s Keeper?’* , 34-52.

^{xiv} Jerzy Jedlicki, ‘How to Grapple with the Perplexing Legacy’, *Polityka*, 10 February 2001

^{xv} Jan Błoński, ‘The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto’, in A. Polonsky (ed.) *‘My Brother’s Keeper?’ Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*’ (London, 1990), 47. For the Polish version of this article see *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11 January 1987.

^{xvi} ‘Facing Hitler and Stalin: On the Subject of Jewish-Soviet ‘Collaboration’ in the Occupied Territories’, to appear in J. Zimmerman (ed.), ‘Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Second World War’.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} This is taken from the Polish version, 114-5. In the English version the last sentence reads: ‘For indeed, the 1,600 Jedwabne Jews were killed neither by the NKVD, nor by the Nazis, nor by the Stalinist secret police. Instead, as we now know beyond reasonable doubt, it was their neighbors who killed them.’

^{xix} Interview with Paweł Paliwoda, *Życie*, 2 February 2001.

^{xx} *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25-6 November 2000.

^{xxi} ‘Poduszka pani Marx’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11 February 2001.

^{xxii} *Neighbors* (English edition), 155.

^{xxiii} Martin Dean, ‘Die Armija Krajowa und die Beteiligung von Polen bei der einheimischen Hilfspolizei in den von den Deutschen besetzten ostpolnischen Gebieten’(unpublished); Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, Ukrainians 1919-1945* (Bloomington, 2002); Sarunas Liekis, ‘Soviet Resistance in East-Southern Lithuania and the Jews’(unpublished).

^{xxiv} *Neighbors* (English edition), 164.

^{xxv} Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists 1945-1950* (Ithaca, 1997); Andrzej Paczkowski (ed.), ‘Raporty o Pogromie’, *Puls* 50/3, 1991.