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 45 Robert Traba, "Wystąpienie", *Gdańska nagroda imienia Ericha Brosta*, Gdańsk 2001, p. 16.  
 46 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship", *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 1999:1, p. 33.  
 47 Andrzej Szpociński, "Antoniny Kłoskowskiej koncepcja kultury narodowej i sąsiedztwa kultur", *Borussia*, No. 26, 2001/2002, p. 168.  
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## The Jedwabne Killings — A Challenge for Polish Collective Memory

### The Polish debate on *Neighbours*

In May 2000 Jan Gross, a Polish-born American scholar, published in Poland the book *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka (Neighbours. The story of the annihilation of a small Jewish town)*. The book immediately led to a stormy debate, which in its emotional intensity was compared to the reactions in Israel to Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* or to the German *Historikerstreit*, but spreading further in society. Why did Jan Gross's book become the most discussed work in Poland in recent years?

The book tells how the Polish inhabitants of the small town of Jedwabne on July 10, 1941 killed their Jewish neighbours. After the partition of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939 the town of Jedwabne in north-east Poland ended up in the Soviet zone. The Soviet regime brought terror and mass deportation.<sup>1</sup> After the outbreak of the German-Soviet War in June 1941, Jedwabne and its surroundings were occupied by the Germans, who egged the Poles on to "settle accounts with the Jews", labelled as "Communists" and "Soviet agents" in the Nazi propaganda. Pogroms took place in the neighbouring villages of Wąsosz and Radziłów, where Jews were tortured and killed by Polish peasants. In Jedwabne there were about 2,500 inhabitants, of whom Jews made up about 60 percent. Representatives of a self-proclaimed local administration of the town,

collaborating with the Germans, ordered the Jews to assemble in the town square, where they were told to knock down a statue of Lenin, erected by the Soviet occupant forces, and to walk around shouting: "We are to blame for this war". They were brutally beaten and later driven into a barn near the square and burned alive. Gross reckons that about 1,600 people were killed in this way. According to him this deed was carried out without any direct involvement of the Germans. About half the adult men in Jedwabne took part in the killing. Some Jews escaped the pogrom and once the war was over, these people were able to testify about the killing. Gross reconstructs the events primarily on the basis of testimonies given by Jedwabne Jews.<sup>2</sup> He also quotes interviews with Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne who, mostly as children, had witnessed the event.<sup>3</sup> Gross also examined the records from two trials in 1949 and 1953, where several inhabitants of Jedwabne were accused of participation in mass killing and some even convicted. However, when the 1960s saw an investigation of Nazi crimes in the region of Białystok, the killing of the Jedwabne Jews was blamed on exclusively the Nazis. A commemorative plaque was put up in the town with the inscription: "Place of the execution of the Jewish population. Here the Gestapo and Hitler's police burned 1,600 people to death on 10 July 1941."

Gross describes the mass killing in Jedwabne in all its horror, and it is clear from the way he presents the events that the purpose of the book is to arouse strong feelings. His aim is not merely to document the horrid crime but to start a discussion about the silence and the lies in Polish history writing about Polish-Jewish relations during World War II and after it. This history writing avoids taking up the subject of antisemitism in Poland. Gross considers that it was precisely this antisemitism that led to the Jedwabne pogrom. He questions the self-image of the Poles as merely passive, irresolute witnesses to the Holocaust. He agrees that they were mainly witnesses, but argues that they were often indifferent or even hostile witnesses and sometimes they also took part in the killings of Jews. By confronting the Poles with the mass murder in Jedwabne, a fact that has not been included in their collective memory, Gross's book constitutes a challenge for the Poles. The aim of this article is to analyse the Polish debate about *Neighbours* in order to show how the Poles have dealt with this

challenge. I would also like to ponder on whether the Jedwabne debate has led to a change in the Polish collective memory of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust.

I have followed the debate in the main Polish newspapers and magazines from the autumn of 2000 to the end of 2001. This has been possible since many of these publications can be read on the Internet. Moreover, the publisher of *Neighbours*, Pogrnicze (Borderland), has set up a website where most contributions to the debate were continuously published.<sup>4</sup> In this way I have been able to acquaint myself with the debate in papers of all political hues.<sup>5</sup> Press articles are thus the most important source for my analysis.<sup>6</sup>

In 2001 the book *Neighbours* also came out in the USA and in Germany, leading, there, too, to some discussion, mostly, but not exclusively, among scholars. However, I do not take them into account in this analysis, because the subject of my investigation here is the reactions to the book in Poland.<sup>7</sup>

### A Few Remarks on Concepts and Instruments of Analysis

This analysis will make use of such concepts as "collective memory" and "historical consciousness", which certainly are not self-evident and are defined in various ways. Therefore I would like to explain how I understand and use those terms here.<sup>8</sup>

By collective memory I refer to a set of ideas, stories, and representations of the past which are produced, reproduced and reshaped within a community or a group. Collective memory is thus a social construction of the past and is found in the cultural resources which the group (the community in question) shares. Working with the memory means selecting and storing information and using it on various occasions. In the same way that memory is part of human consciousness, collective memory is part of the group's or community's historical consciousness. Historical consciousness might be described as an mental process through which we create an image of the past for ourselves, give it meaning, put it in relationship with our present and future. The historical consciousness of a group or a community arises through complex interaction between *collective memory* (those resources for memory shared by the group), *identity* (how the group

defines itself in relation to the world and to time) and *current needs* with a group or community due to its social or political conditions. Historical consciousness explains the dynamics of collective memory. It influences the creation of new memory resources, it dictates which resources within collective memory remain latent and which are put into use through active recollection.

From an analytical viewpoint, Gross's book may be considered as a new resource in the collective memory that has been put into use by various groups in Polish society. In my analysis of the debate I would therefore like to apply a typology of various *uses of history* that has been formulated by Klas-Göran Karlsson.<sup>9</sup> He describes the following types of uses of history: scholarly, moral, existential, ideological and a "non-use". All of them correspond to various human needs, various user groups and they fulfil various tasks in society.<sup>10</sup> In what follows I intend to demonstrate that all these types surfaced in the Jedwabne debate, which shows that *Neighbours* brought many needs to the fore and fulfilled specific functions in Polish society. Here we can look for the reasons why this book received so much attention and discuss how it has affected the historical consciousness of Polish society.

### The Use and Non-Use of the History of Polish-Jewish Relations during World War II

The intensity of the Polish debate about Gross's *Neighbours* can only be understood against the long and widespread non-use of those parts of Polish history which concern Polish-Jewish relations in the twentieth century. In a number of discussions after the publication of *Neighbours*, Polish historians were asked: "Why did you not write about this?"

No satisfactory answers were given. Often Polish historians defended themselves by referring to Communist censorship, which made it impossible to write on sensitive and controversial subjects.<sup>11</sup> Yet answers of this kind were not convincing for everybody in Poland. It was well known that underground publishing was a very lively activity in Communist Poland. Nobody, however, made use of those channels for writing on Polish-Jewish relationships during the Holocaust or

about antisemitism. The main causes of this silence were clearly something other than censorship. Here I will therefore attempt to reconstruct the reasons for the Polish non-use of Holocaust history by following those hints and thin lines that emerged in the debate, using information gathered from other sources.<sup>12</sup>

About 90 per cent of Poland's Jews perished during World War II. The question whether it might have been possible to rescue more was rarely discussed before the end of the 1980s, and when it was raised, the answer was usually in the negative, with reference to the fact that Poland was the only country in Europe where assistance to Jews entailed the death penalty. However, those using this argument disregarded the fact that there were many more infringements that the Nazi occupant in Poland punished with death, for instance assistance to the resistance movement or smuggling of food. This did not keep the Poles from involvement in such activities. The difference was that these activities were encouraged and supported by the whole Polish community, while there was no such social support for assistance to Jews. After the war, many of those who had helped Jews preferred to keep silent about it, since their actions were far from appreciated in their community.<sup>13</sup> Jews had been excluded from the definition of the Polish national community long before World War II, and antisemitism had gathered momentum in the 1930s. Therefore they were not included in the solidarity and ethical norms of the Polish national community. During the war, there were many incidents when individuals and groups killed Jews who fled the Nazi terror. There were also people who assisted the Germans in looting and assaults, as inhabitants were driven from Jewish ghettos. Gross demonstrates in his book about the case of Jedwabne that Poles also took part in attacks that could be described as pogroms. Moreover, the end of the war did not mean the end of antisemitism. The Kielce pogrom in 1946, even if performed by a provoked mob, nevertheless speaks clearly for itself.<sup>14</sup>

Since the end of World War II all this has been hushed up in Polish society, not only in history writing, media, schools, but also to a large extent in the oral transmission of history within families. It became a repressed part of collective memory. "My ears are ringing with this silence", a reader wrote to *Gazeta Wyborcza* (December 15, 2000)

during the Jedwabne debate. He described the town of his childhood, children that lived in houses abandoned by the victims of the Holocaust, and who played in places where people had been executed, without knowing that precisely those places had been the scene of the Holocaust.

Antisemitism was never dealt with. According to the Communist regime it belonged solely to the past, the so-called "reactionary", capitalist Poland of the interwar period. There was no connection made in Poland between antisemitism and the Holocaust, since the Holocaust was seen as purely the deed of Nazi Germany. In other countries, antisemites had often collaborated with the Germans, and therefore, after the war they could be labelled traitors and be condemned by the community. In Poland there never was any official collaboration between the Poles and the occupant, and thus one could remain a patriot, fight against Nazism (and thus be respected) and still be an antisemite.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, since the late 1950s a sort of Polonisation of the Holocaust took place. The Holocaust was presented to the public (in schools and in the media) as something that had hit Jews and Poles equally hard. It was not denied that the Nazis wanted to exterminate all the Jews but the choice was to focus on Polish wartime suffering. More attention was given to concentration camps (where Poles constituted a large group of prisoners) than extermination camps, and the difference between them became blurred for the generations of Poles born after the war. Auschwitz became a symbol of Polish martyrdom and a plaque proclaimed that "four million Poles and citizens of other nations" had perished there.<sup>16</sup> After 1968 official history books claimed, on the subject of World War II, that the Nazis had planned to physically eradicate "the entire Polish population – Poles as well as national minorities: Jews, Ukrainians, Bielorussians, Gypsies".<sup>17</sup> The suffering of the Jews was put on an equal footing with that of others, and generations of Poles who grew up with textbooks written in that spirit never fully understood the extremely vulnerable position of the Jews, compared to other nationalities.

Why did the Polish population accept this official interpretation without resistance and make it its own? One explanation is that Poles had no difficulty in identifying with the role of the sufferer. An

important element in Polish identity has for over two hundred years been that of the victim. Since the end of the eighteenth century national calamities and sufferings constitute the core of Polish national history: the partitions of the country, oppression under foreign powers for more than a hundred years, and then again, but for a short breathing-space of twenty years, the occupation and terror of World War II, which in turn was followed by Communist oppression. With such experiences, Poles were inclined to put their own tribulations in the centre of collective memory. Memory process implies a selection. People tend to see and remember what corresponds to their expectations or needs. There is a connection between memory and identity, and they are in a complex interaction. In this light Poles had no difficulty in internalising the memory of the Holocaust as solely a part of Nazi crimes in Poland and thus of the memory of Polish suffering. Remembering oneself primarily in the role of victim also put aside the question of one's own responsibility in an effective way. Trying to repress memories that cause pain, shame or a guilty conscience is a well-known psychological mechanism, which probably can contribute to the understanding of the Poles' non-use of Holocaust history. Michael Steinlauf even claims that the fact that the Poles witnessed the Holocaust led to a particular psychological trauma, which paradoxically strengthened their negative feelings towards the Jews.<sup>18</sup> Since the Holocaust took place before their eyes, the Poles had been put to a moral test which they felt they had not passed. Shame and guilt which they cannot control make them feel animosity towards those that indirectly put them to that test and remind them of it, i.e. the Jews. This psychological aspect of the Polish memory of the Holocaust was also discussed during the Jedwabne debate and it was pointed out that the only way to deal with the trauma was to bring the repressed memories to light and work through them.<sup>19</sup>

The social consequences of the Holocaust in Poland have contributed to the difficulty of dealing with that memory. Pre-war Poland was urbanised only to a small extent, and the Jewish minority constituted an important part of the urban population, with an economy based on trade and craft. This led to envy among their competitors, the Polish lower middle class and those poor Poles who migrated from the overpopulated countryside into towns, looking for some occupation.

The fate of the Jews during World War II turned out to be to the economic advantage of those groups. As soon as the Jews were gone, they hastened to take over their shops and small firms and moved into the vacated Jewish homes. A non-negligible factor in the social and demographic transformation in Poland at the end of the war was that millions of poor peasants from villages and suburbs moved into what had been the Jewish centres in towns, particularly small towns.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the scale of the post-war silence about the Jews and the Holocaust is in proportion to the scale of participation in the looting? The fact that those who took the place of the Jews did not want to tell their children and grandchildren about what had occurred, indicates that memories evoke some kind of guilt and moral discomfort. One way of silencing the remorse was to repeat old antisemitic stereotypes about how Jews had always been disloyal and hostile to the Poles and Poland, and therefore did not deserve to be mourned. The generation that took part in the looting certainly did not want to be reminded of it. Are their children psychologically able to deal and work with these memories, or is their emotional involvement too great, and will such a development only take place in later generations? This question, too, emerged in the Jedwabne debate.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the psychological and social background to the silence on Polish-Jewish relations, we should also mention its political context. Between 1945 and 1989 Poland was governed by a Communist regime, which lacked legitimacy in society, and this regime did not hesitate to use antisemitism as an ideological weapon. During the Stalin era accusations about antisemitism were used without distinction in order to discredit all ideological and political opponents. In Poland, where the stereotype of Jewish Communism had been potent since the 1920s,<sup>22</sup> this unintentionally led to a connection between Jews and a regime which was perceived as a threat to Polishness. The endeavours of the regime to counteract this connection by consciously attempting to conceal the Jewish background of people who occupied important administrative or political posts only made the situation worse.<sup>23</sup> Anti-Jewish stereotypes and antisemitism therefore became a sensitive issue, and after the Stalin years the regime preferred to keep quiet on the subject until 1968. Then it was again used as an ideological weapon, this time in an internal settling of accounts

within the Communist party. Communists with Jewish background were accused of Zionism, purged from the party, harassed and more or less forced to emigrate. The so-called Jews in the government were pointed out as guilty of the mistakes and crimes of the regime, in order to clear the party of any responsibility. The outside world quickly reacted to this, and the Western media described the events in Poland as yet another example of "Polish antisemitism". The regime responded with intensive propaganda about Jews and Germans together accusing Poles of antisemitism and of playing a part in the Holocaust, including extermination camps etc. The Polish media were adamant about there never having been antisemitism in Poland. The accusations were described as vile rumours spread by Poland's enemies. Thus Polish antisemitism was mentioned in a context intended to arouse (and in 1968 it indeed did so in some circles) antisemitism. This made the issue so sensitive that many Polish intellectuals who saw through the game the regime was playing found it difficult to raise this issue for many years afterwards, fearing they would be misunderstood or would receive unwanted reactions from the public.<sup>24</sup> The subject became taboo.

Gross's book, however, was not the first one to break the taboo. It was gradually undermined and the process began already during the last decade of Communism in Poland. In the more liberal atmosphere after the emergence of the Solidarity movement in 1980 the younger generation began to show interest in hidden parts of Polish history, including the history of the Jews. This interest has since been sustained and has led to scores of publications. The question about the Poles' attitude towards the Jews during the Holocaust was first brought to the fore with Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* in 1985, and then after the publication of Jan Błński's now well-known essay *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* ("Poor Poles Watching the Ghetto") in 1987. While the picture of the Polish-Jewish relationships given by *Shoah* was generally dismissed by Poles as an unjust attack by a foreigner who failed to understand the situation, Błński's essay led to a long and rather bitter debate. However, the debate was mostly confined to the intellectual élite around *Tygodnik Powszechny*, the Catholic intellectual weekly that published the essay. Nevertheless, this debate drove more historians to investigate the subject, and after

the breakdown of Communism the 1990s brought a number of publications on this and related subjects. Let me mention just a few of them. 1992 saw Krystyna Kersten's *Żydzi – Polacy – Komunizm* ("Poles – Jews – Communism"), 1994 Barbara Enkelking Boni's *Zagłada i pamięć* ("Holocaust and Memory"); 1998 brought Jan Gross's *Upiorna dekada* ("The Ghastly Decade") and 1999 Feliks Tych's *Długi cień zagłady* ("The Long Shadow of the Holocaust"). Moreover, the Catholic reviews *Więź* (1999) and *Znak* (2000) published special issues discussing these questions.<sup>25</sup> These publications led to the emergence of a different picture of Polish-Jewish relationships during World War II. However, Gross's *Neighbours* from 2000 was the first work that was taken into active use for the discussion of the image of the Holocaust in Polish collective memory and its place in the historical consciousness of the Poles. Was it because of the provocative message of the book? Or was it because the book was published and brought to the fore abroad? All this certainly played a part, but I would like to argue that reasons for the reactions to the book must also be sought in specific needs and conditions of the Polish society at the time when it appeared. These circumstances made it possible that the book could be used to fulfil certain functions in Polish society. Let us follow this path of reasoning by analysing how the book and the memory it evoked was used in the Polish debate.

### "The Devil is in the Details" or the Scholarly Use of History

The aim of the scholarly use of history is to discover, reconstruct, interpret and verify the result of one's research. Gross's reconstruction of the Jedwabne events and his interpretation have been examined by Polish historians. The arguments raised by those critical of the book concerned Gross's presentation, methodology and allegedly inadequate account of the context of the events. Gross's way of writing was thus labelled "emotional" and "polemical". As for the methodology, he was accused of an "uncritical attitude towards arbitrarily selected sources".<sup>26</sup> The question was whether Gross had the right to base his account chiefly on the testimonials of victims who had escaped the pogrom in Jedwabne at the last minute. Gross's attitude on this

point was a matter of principle. In a special chapter in *Neighbours* entitled "A new attitude towards sources" he declared that the information given by Holocaust victims should not be questioned until clear evidence emerges that contradicts them.<sup>27</sup> This declaration was criticised by many historians. Results from witness psychology were quoted to support the argument that this attitude to sources is unsustainable. The historian Bogdan Musiał<sup>28</sup> examined critically the witness testimonials used by Gross and found a number of minor misjudgements and mistakes. For instance, it turned out that one of the witnesses (Abram Borusczak) had never been in Jedwabne, and that another one (Eliasz Gradowski) was not there at the time of the killings. They had in fact heard about the events from other people.<sup>29</sup> Musiał and several other historians also questioned Gross's estimate of the number of victims and perpetrators. This estimate was based on the number of inhabitants in Jedwabne before the war and did not take account of the changes in 1939–1941.

It must however be emphasised that no Polish historian, no matter how critical, questioned the fact that the killings had taken place and that Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne had taken part. The crucial point was how far the Germans had been involved. At the outset of the debate this was a central issue. Historians such as Szarota, Musiał, Strzembosz and others claimed that because of inadequate sources there was a considerable risk for Gross to jump to conclusions about the Germans' passive role in the killings. If a small group of Polish criminal elements had terrorised the town together with the Nazis, one could not speak about a pogrom carried out by the inhabitants. The question about the responsibility for the killing and the identity of the perpetrators was considered very important, not only by historians but also by the public. Gross's evidence was not considered sufficient in order to answer this question beyond any possible doubt, and it was therefore decided that a special research institute, the Institute for National Memory,<sup>30</sup> would investigate the Jedwabne case. Today the Institute has finished its investigation report, and the results show that Gross could have been mistaken as to the number of victims, but not as to his most important claim, namely that the killings were carried out by Polish male inhabitants of Jedwabne without much interference from the Germans. In November 2002

the Institute published a work entitled *Wokół Jedwabnego* documenting the crime.

Making scholarly use of history implies the intention to explain and understand the past in its own right. This means that the investigated event must be placed in its correct historical context. Gross's critics claimed that as a scholar he had neglected this point by interpreting the Jedwabne killings as one of many expressions of the dark forces of antisemitism. Can the crime be understood solely in terms of "traditional Polish antisemitism"? A number of historians pointed out that it must first and foremost be seen against the background of World War II, the demoralisation and escalating violence in the occupied territories. Strzembosz, Szarota and other historians claimed that Gross all too easily discarded the idea that Soviet occupation had led to a deterioration of Polish-Jewish relations, and thus excluded that a need for revenge for the previous Jewish collaboration with the Soviet occupant might be an important motive for the mass murder. In *Neighbours* Gross argues against the idea of revenge by means of statistics, which show that significantly more Poles than Jews collaborated with the Soviet administration. However, many did not consider this argument adequate. Many participants in the debate referred to Polish memories of Jews collaborating with Soviet authorities. It seems that the picture of the Jews as zealous collaborators and denunciators for the Soviet occupant was widespread in Soviet-occupied territory.<sup>31</sup>

The question of the attitude of Jews towards the Soviet occupant was, next to the part played by the Germans, the other most controversial issue in the Jedwabne debate. By taking it up, the participants in the debate sought rational explanations for Polish antisemitism. Gross took up this subject in a panel debate and claimed that the evidence evoked as to the Poles perceiving the Jews as Soviet collaborators rather corroborated than contradicted his thesis that antisemitism and nothing else was the primary cause of the Jedwabne pogrom. This perception was possible because of the deeply rooted antisemitic stereotype among Poles about Jewish Communism and the Jew as an enemy.<sup>32</sup> Gross was supported on this point by many Polish scholars and prominent intellectuals (e.g. Jedlicki, Głowiński, Kurczewski, Michnik).

An interim stance was taken by Andrzej Żbikowski, a specialist on Eastern European twentieth-century Jewish history. In a number of contributions he pointed out that a number of pogroms took place after the German entry in 1941 in all that part of Eastern Europe which had been under Soviet rule 1939–1940 (in Poland, Lithuania, western Ukraine and Bessarabia).<sup>33</sup> This would indicate that antisemitism among the population grew during Soviet occupation. Old stereotypes were reinforced since Jews were visible in Soviet power structures. They were given posts that they had never had the chance of attaining in Poland, Lithuania or Romania, where antisemitism was evident before the war. Unlike the majority population, they had little reason to mourn the old states which fell victim to the Soviet regime. Considering what they knew about German plans for the Jews, they were happy to have ended up under Soviet administration. Thus the interests of the majority population and of the Jews were disparate. Żbikowski sees further connections between Soviet occupation and subsequent pogroms. During the Soviet terror élites, individuals and groups who could have acted as moral authorities were eliminated. In the vacuum and atmosphere of impunity that followed, when the Soviet administration had left and the Germans were on their way, all kinds of criminals took over the local communities. Their impulse was to loot and get rich at the expense of the Jews. The animosity towards the Jewish population stopped others from defending the Jews. In order to understand what happened in Jedwabne this whole context has to be taken into account, and according to Żbikowski Gross has not fully managed to do so. However, Żbikowski emphasised that antisemitism is an important part of this context, and therefore it should become the subject of reflection and further examination in both public debate and historical research.

To come to the truth about Jedwabne, to reconstruct to the finest detail what had occurred, to put the events in their correct context and discuss various interpretations, became a concern for not only for historians but also for broad groups. The proof was the enormous quantity of letters to the editors of newspapers that published articles on Jedwabne. At the same time, the scholarly discussion aroused some doubt: Is it moral to discuss details, to count bodies, to argue about possible and impossible motifs when you are confronted with

so horrendous a crime.<sup>34</sup> Can one look for explanations for a crime without the risk of excusing its perpetrators? There is no doubt that historical studies of crimes in the past combine scholarly and moral uses of history.

### "Time for Penance" – On the Moral Use of History

In *Neighbours* and in a number of contributions to the debate about Jedwabne, Gross emphasised, first and foremost in ethical terms, the need to remember the wrong that the Poles did to their Jewish neighbours.<sup>35</sup> He considers that the truth has its own intrinsic value, and moreover a therapeutic effect. If individuals or groups lie and hush up part of their "biography", they cannot live a normal life free from trauma and worry. The truth should be important for the Poles themselves in order to "clear their consciences", but it is also important for the rehabilitation of the victims. According to Gross, Poland had never really mourned the loss of three million citizens who were Polish Jews.

Gross's appeal for a moral examination of conscience in Polish society received a variety of responses. There was no agreement as to who should feel the moral responsibility for the Jedwabne crime and for the silence surrounding it. In the nationalistic press (e.g. *Nasz Dziennik*, *Nasza Polska*) the dominant attitude was that the crime was a tragic episode that occurred under specific (according to those papers still not clarified) circumstances. Ordinary Poles therefore have nothing to do with it, especially not the Poles of today. The most active writer in the nationalistic press, the historian Jerzy Robert Nowak argued in his numerous articles for the thesis that the greatest mistake of the Poles would be to confess to some kind of guilt of the Jedwabne crime. This would lead to the Polish nation becoming in the eyes of the world the executioner of the Jews, just like the Germans. To the recurrent question – who and in whose name should ask the Jews for forgiveness – J.R. Nowak and his colleague Andrzej Echolette expressed the extreme view that it was the Jews who should ask the Poles to forgive their "anti-Polish lies" and other wrongdoings.<sup>36</sup> A great many readers of those newspapers sent in letters in which they agreed with these opinions.

In liberal papers there were also some voices expressing doubt as to a collective confession of guilt by Polish society, although for entirely other reasons. It was asked why those born after the war should feel responsible for something that happened during the war.<sup>37</sup> A historian and well-known publicist Marek Jan Chodakiewicz wrote: "to put collective guilt on the Poles as a nation is the same as holding the Jews responsible for collaboration with NKVD".<sup>38</sup> He wanted to point out that individuals and groups, not nations, commit crimes and should be held responsible. A similar line of reasoning was expressed by the renowned liberal journalist Jacek Żakowski. He was critical of all "ethnic or national quantifiers", such as "all Poles", "all Jews". He considered that speaking in such terms reinforced stereotypes and could in the long run only lead to hatred. Moreover, he stressed that responsibility is only an individual matter and that you can only be responsible for what you could have influenced or can influence. His conclusion was thus: "I am not responsible for what happened in Jedwabne, but I am responsible as to what I do with this knowledge."<sup>39</sup>

Catholic circles, just like the liberals, were divided as to the handling of the question of guilt and responsibility in the Jedwabne case. On the one hand, the Catholic intellectuals grouped around the influential reviews *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Znak* and *Więź* were very active in the debate and very clear about the guilt of the Poles, their moral responsibility and the need for penance and making amends.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, the fundamentalist Radio Maryja and the Catholic weekly *Niedziela* supported the nationalistic point of view described above. *Niedziela* published a whole series of articles on the theme *100 lies by Jan Gross*, written by J.R. Nowak. As for the official statements of the bishops, one is struck by their way of dealing with Jedwabne in terms of moralistic universalism.<sup>41</sup> In the light of this universalist interpretation the Poles are morally responsible for the Jedwabne killings, but not as Poles, only as human beings. The Jedwabne crime shows first and foremost the darkest sides of human nature. The question of Polish guilt is thus disconnected from the historical context of antisemitism in Poland before, during and after the war. Consequently the conclusion was also made in this universalist spirit – no matter how guilty Poles feel about precisely this crime they should apologise "in the name of love and reconciliation".<sup>42</sup>

However, most articles in the liberal and socialist press, as well as in Catholic intellectual periodicals, went further as to the issue of responsibility. In polemics with Żakowski the publicist Dariusz Czaja expressed this attitude as follows: "We have no legal responsibility for the deeds of our forefathers but we have a moral responsibility for them."<sup>43</sup> This opinion was voiced by the most influential representatives of the Polish intellectual élite, for instance Andrzej Wajda, Stanisław Lem, Adam Michnik, Maria Janion, Jerzy Jedlicki, Michał Głowiński, Jacek Kurczewski and Jan Nowak-Jeziorański. The latter wrote:

Since it comes easy to us to feel national pride [...] we must also be capable of feeling national shame for shameful deeds. As a nation [...] we must [...] confess sins and wrongdoings committed by every Polish Cain who offended against the commandment "Thou shalt not kill". If we expect compensation from others for the crimes committed against Poland and the Poles we must also show the will to compensate those wrongs that we did to our neighbours.<sup>44</sup>

Those representing this point of view claimed that the moral responsibility demands from the Poles an examination of conscience, confession of guilt and making amends symbolically in the form of an official apology. The idea was that this in turn would lead to a reconciliation between Poles and Jews, that the Polish confession of guilt and repentance would put an end to reciprocal accusations of antisemitism and anti-Polonism, heal wounds and reduce antipathy. It was hoped that the truth about Polish-Jewish relations during the war would create a new platform for a Polish-Jewish dialogue.

The debate on Jedwabne also revealed another dimension in the moral use of history – the view on history as "vitae magistra". One frequent opinion in the debate was that the truth must be told so that *we can learn from history*. In one letter to *Gazeta Wyborcza* (December 15, 2000) a reader wrote: "If nobody feels guilty the crime may be committed again. If we decline responsibility we lay the foundations for a new sacrificial altar." Many voices in the debate considered that the memory of Jedwabne should act as a warning, increase society's moral vigilance, make the Poles understand what tolerance of antisemitism and xenophobia can lead to. The past cannot be altered,

but the future can be influenced if one settles accounts with the past and takes a clear and condemnatory stance against the legacy of antisemitism.<sup>45</sup> In this reasoning about Jedwabne we see clearly how historical consciousness works in several time perspectives and establishes continuity between the past, the present and the future. A good illustration thereof is the following quotation from the debate dealing with the question of collective responsibility for the past:

[...] solidarity with our ancestors is linked to [...] solidarity with our descendants. We want to transmit to them the best of what we have and warn them about dangers that may threaten them. Therefore we must examine the wrong that has been done. Those that come after us will need to know about it in order to avoid it. Therefore, of our own free will, we want to make penance for the sins of our ancestors, so that we can transmit to our descendants a feeling of responsibility and an answer to evil that brings hope.<sup>46</sup>

During the debate on Jedwabne many Polish intellectuals called for a ceremony to be held in Jedwabne with the participation of the chief representatives of the Polish government and the Polish Catholic Church. The ceremony was to be a symbolic act of confession of guilt and repentance. There would be a tribute paid to the victims. The first step would be a new plaque on the spot where they were burned to death. The demands for symbolic amends were met. The old plaque was replaced by a simple monument with an inscription (a compromise after lengthy negotiations with Jewish organisations and the inhabitants of Jedwabne) in Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish: "To the memory of the Jews of Jedwabne and its vicinity, men, women and children, co-hosts of this region, killed, burned alive on this spot on 10 July 1941." On July 10, 2001, on the sixtieth anniversary of the killing, a solemn ceremony was organised in Jedwabne. Representatives of numerous Jewish organisations in Poland and abroad participated. From the Polish side there were President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, members of the government, leaders of several large political parties, and some Catholic bishops. In a solemn speech Poland's president apologised in his own name and

in the name of all Poles whose conscience is struck by this mass murder, in the name of those who consider that one cannot be proud of Polish history without feeling pain and shame because of the wrongdoings committed by Poles against others.<sup>47</sup>

In President Kwaśniewski's speech both the moral and the political dimension were prominent. He emphasised for instance that the Polish state, its authorities and representatives had not been involved in the killings of the Jews. The Holocaust and the Jedwabne murder took place when the Polish state did not exist and thus it was not able to defend its citizens against violent acts, performed by or approved of and inspired by the Nazi occupant. In Kwaśniewski's words, the Poles that committed violent acts thus committed crimes against Poland, its history and "great tradition". In such a perspective, the Polish perpetrators were externalised, and placed outside the Polish tradition which thus could remain sacred, and the president appeared as its defendant. By pointing out that the Polish state was innocent he acted as a saviour of "Polish honour", thus gaining in political popularity. It was one of the many moments when moral, existential and political uses of history intertwined in the debate on Jedwabne.

### "We are Now a Different People" — On the Existential Use of History

The existential use of history concerns the human need to remember in order to seek stability and sense of purpose in existence.<sup>48</sup> In other words, it is about the human need to remember in order to shape and reshape identity. Every construction of identity assumes that we put ourselves in relation not only to "significant others" but also to "us" in the past. Thus memory and identity are connected. By challenging the Poles' collective memory, *Neighbours* also put to the test the Poles' view of themselves and their idea of Polish national identity. This was clearly reflected in the debate. The letters to the editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (see for instance the issue of November 24, 2000) time and again express shock and incredulity that Poles would have been capable of committing mass murder. "I was completely taken aback!" — "I woke up in a different country", "It is not possible — it must be

a lie". The recurrent question was: Would the Poles be capable of committing mass murder? "A heroic, chivalrous nation with a deep feeling for honour and humanitarian and Christian values?"<sup>49</sup> To see oneself as a criminal was something entirely new in the self-portrait of the Poles and a traumatic experience. It led to a discussion about the Poles' view of themselves and their history. Intellectuals who took part in this discussion observed that several generations of Poles had grown up with a mythologised image of Polish history. Agnieszka Magdziak-Miszewska, editor of *Więź*, provided the following analysis of this process:

[...] we accepted without much resistance the history of Polish honour and heroism [...] All in all, our attitude to our own history was [...] first and foremost affirmative and because of our attitude to the regime in power [...] deeply emotional. The climax of this affirmation came with Solidarity in 1980 and the subsequent resistance after the introduction of martial law. This experience confirmed the view of Poland and Poles that we had created, a nation of freedom-loving patriots, capable of great deeds and great sacrifices, and naturally always fighting for your freedom and ours.<sup>50</sup>

Many contributions to the debate conveyed a feeling that the Polish world of the values people had agreed on and believed in was about to be crushed, that it was crumbling and decaying. The mayor of Jedwabne, Krzysztof Godlewski, said in a discussion about the killings:

Whatever I may say on this subject I will offend someone by stepping on something sacred. Are we still that "royal Piast tribe" which we have been so proud of? When I ask this kind of question I involuntarily come into conflict with my own father.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, what emerged in the debate was an identity crisis in Polish society, provoked by the revelation of the Jedwabne killings. Many participants tried to tackle this crisis. Let us look at some of the main strategies.

One, expressed in the rightist and nationalistic press, took the form of an aggressive defensive discourse, quintessentially refusing to

accept the truth about Jedwabne. It contained a staunch defence of the traditional paradigm of Poles as innocent victims, undeservingly accused of antisemitism. Within this discourse, *Neighbours* was interpreted as an attack on the Polish nation, its values and honour. Gross was proclaimed a traitor.<sup>53</sup>

However, the most usual strategy was a defensive discourse, characterised by ambivalence. It was in principle acknowledged that Poles were guilty of the Jedwabne mass murder but rational explanations were sought, such as revenge, German complicity in the crime etc. There was a readiness to discuss myths and falsifications in Polish history, but a reluctance to discuss antisemitism as part of the national heritage. Within this discourse concerns were expressed that revelations by "critical history writing" would destroy the old foundations of the national community without proposing anything new in their place.<sup>54</sup>

The third strategy was represented by a smaller yet strong and audible group among the participants in the debate, belonging to liberal circles or Catholic intellectuals. They chose to see Jedwabne not as a threat but as an opportunity for Polish identity. They claimed that by dealing with the heritage of antisemitism and confronting the dark pages of their history, the Poles have been given an opportunity to re-form their identity and become an open and modern society without traumas or complexes.<sup>55</sup> They further argued that a mythologised image of Polish history probably fulfilled an important function during the years when there was a need to fight the oppressors of the nation. The struggle demanded sacrifice and people are able to make sacrifices only for something they believe in, something they consider good and valuable. Now that Poland has become a sovereign state and a free nation, the time has come to reassess one's national history. It was pointed out that this process had already started before Jedwabne was brought to the fore. Many of the Solidarity veterans had lost their heroic auras. Minorities such as Germans and Ukrainians began to tell their versions of history which were very different from the Polish one. Jedwabne could be seen as yet another step in the same direction. The most radical representatives of this point of view, for instance Król, Głowiński, Kurczewski, Słobodzianek, Skarżyńska, Tokarska-Bakir, called for a critical revision of the entire Polish culture in order to find what there was in it that could make Poles inclined

to "inflict pain on others".<sup>56</sup> Several contributors to the debate did not hesitate to entirely question the value of nation and national community.<sup>57</sup> However, they met with polemics from other participants who pointed out the inherent paradox in questioning the value of the national community and simultaneously invoking this same national community in order to make it to confess its guilt and assume collective responsibility. The moral and the existential dimension of the debate merged here. Zdzisław Krasnodębski commented on it in the following way:

Sometimes it seems that the memory of crimes committed by a nation should serve not only the struggle against nationalism, but also the severing of national ties generally. We believe that if we get rid of thinking in these categories we will get a warrant that ethnic cleansing and genocide will not occur again. Once the German Left reasoned in that way [...] It turned out, however, that the nation was absolutely necessary for confession of guilt and making amends. It had to remain, at least as a *Schamegemeinschaft*.<sup>58</sup>

In the same article Krasnodębski pointed out that *Neighbours* appealed to the national identity of the reader:

Without the existence of national ties it would be impossible to explain why I react differently to this book than when I read about crimes committed for instance by Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians or even Germans, among whom I have lived for ten years and whose culture I've known even longer. If the Liberals are right in saying that national identity is a matter of choice and that it is possible to distance oneself from the national community, why am I concerned by this crime precisely as a Pole? [...] And the knowledge that the nation is but a construction by intellectuals does not help me either.

The issue of identity and shame has repeatedly been raised in the Jedwabne debate. This demonstrates how important the others' view of us is for our collective identity. Recurrent questions in the debate were: What will the world say about us Poles? Will we for all times be stamped as antisemites in the eyes of the world? It is difficult to construct a strong identity on shame.<sup>59</sup> In order to tackle this, in order

to give the Poles the opportunity to acknowledge their guilt while retaining their self-respect, those voices that saw Jedwabne as a historic chance for the Poles chose to interpret the confession of guilt as a sign of strength, something one could be proud of. It was said that truly strong nations are proud of great moments in their history, but at the same time they do not fear to tell about its dark pages. Jedwabne would not merely become the symbol of Polish antisemitism but also of the Polish ability to surpass it. It would be transformed from a negative into a positive symbol. A good example of this strategy to use Jedwabne both existentially and politically in order to provide the opportunity for a re-orientation of Polish society can be found in an editorial, published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* on July 10, 2001, on the day of the ceremony in Jedwabne, with the title "Stanać w prawdzie" ("To stand amidst the truth"). It said among other things:

For one year Poland has been examining its conscience. A debate, never seen before, is taking place in our public sphere. The debate about the murder of Jews, committed by their neighbours in Jedwabne, has sometimes been dramatic, but it constitutes a dialogue between free people. Poland is today the only post-Communist country which has dared such a confrontation with its history and its shame [...] All this shows that the Polish democracy is on the road of truth and that truth serves democracy. We deserve a place in the community of free nations. There are reasons for other nations to view Poland with respect.

### In the Shadow of Jedwabne — On the Political Use of History

"It is not only a moral challenge", it is "a grave political problem", wrote Stanisław Krajewski about Jedwabne.<sup>60</sup> This awareness spread among the Polish political élite when the debate flared up. In a time when Poland is making an effort to join the EU and endeavouring to give itself a positive image of a free, modern and democratic country, it was feared that the discovery of the Jedwabne case would mar this process. In the last two decades, reasoning in ethical terms has become an important element in world politics. To be a victim constitutes

today a moral capital of great political importance. In such a context it was particularly hard for the Poles to accept that, with the revelation of the Jedwabne killings, they were robbed of that capital.<sup>61</sup> An event which took place 60 years ago suddenly revealed that the Poles had not been merely the victims of two totalitarian regimes and witnesses to the Holocaust, but that they sometimes also had acted as perpetrators.

It was feared that the rumour about Jedwabne would strengthen the relatively common stereotype in the West of Poles as antisemites. The situation was all the more sensitive since a privatisation law had been passed in 1999, which gave people the right to claim the property they had lost after 1945. However, only those who were Polish citizens when the law came into force were entitled to do so. A number of American Jews criticised this law, claiming that it was deliberately intended to avoid restituting Jewish property, and a group of New York Jews even filed a plaint against the Polish state.<sup>62</sup>

The political and cultural élite was also worried how the public would react to Jedwabne. The claim that Jews accused Poles of the Holocaust had been used in the 1960s by the regime in order to create antipathy against Jews among the population, which at that time had succeeded up to a point. How would the public react now if Jedwabne led to declarations which were understood as "anti-Polish" and if Poles in the Western media were represented as incorrigible antisemites? Was there not a risk that some kind of neo-antisemitism would be resuscitated?<sup>63</sup> In that case, this would further harm Poland's image. Politicians considered that immediate preventive action was in Poland's interest. The first step was to give the Institute for National Memory the task of thoroughly investigating the Jedwabne event. This was in order to clarify the question of guilt beyond any doubt and prevent attempts at revisionist arguments. The next step was intended to forestall a degradation of Polish-Jewish relations. In the autumn of 2000 the Polish Foreign Secretary Władysław Bartoszewski visited the Knesset in Israel and in April 2001 he made a speech to the Jewish World Congress in the USA. During these visits he expressed the will of the Polish state to find out the whole truth about Jedwabne and deal with the legacy of antisemitism. It was known that Gross's work would be published in English in the spring of 2001 and information about the book was spread through announcements in

the *New York Times Book Review*. A few weeks before that publication, Leon Kieres, the director of the Institute for National Memory, travelled to the United States in order to meet representatives of the most important American Jewish organisations and tell them how the Jedwabne case was handled in Poland. The speeches he then made were characterised by humility, and emphasised the need for truth and reconciliation in Polish-Jewish relations. Kieres spoke in the same spirit of reconciliation in the interviews he gave to the Polish press, but here, in contrast to his US speeches, he clearly pointed out that "Poles must not be accused of taking part in the Holocaust".<sup>64</sup>

The Polish political and cultural élite soon realised that an official act of confession of guilt, contrition and will of reconciliation was important both morally and politically. Therefore the already mentioned official funeral and ceremony of penance was held in Jedwabne in July 2001, and it was broadcast by Polish television's state-owned channel. Speeches about reconciliation were held, not only by the President but also by Rabbi Baker from New York, who had grown up in Jedwabne, and by the Israeli ambassador in Poland. The latter chose to stress the fact that he had survived the war thanks to other Polish neighbours who had taken him in.

The majority, but far from all, of the Polish political élite supported the way the Polish state handled the Jedwabne case. The Centre-Right coalition (AWS), consisting of dozens of parties, was divided on the Jedwabne issue, just like the Catholic church, whose leader Cardinal Glemp also refrained from taking part in the ceremony. He had, however, on May 25, 2001 (i.e., quite shortly before the ceremony) held penance prayers for the victims and for a reconciliation between Poles and Jews.

### "This Book Has Been Written on Commission" — On the Ideological Use of History

Many contributions to the debate bear witness not only to a political, but also to an ideological use of history. The memory of Jedwabne became an instrument used in the ideological struggle between, on the one hand, liberals and left-wing liberals, and the nationalistic right on the other.

The liberals, grouped around *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Polityka*, *Wprost*, *Rzeczpospolita* and *Res Publica*, did not hide their intention of turning Jedwabne into an important breaking point in Polish collective consciousness. The Jedwabne affair was compared to the Dreyfus affair.<sup>65</sup> It was claimed that just as in France a hundred years earlier, a confrontation had occurred in Poland between the forces of nationalism and traditionalism on the one hand, and the forces of modern enlightened liberalism on the other. The fight in France was, as in Poland now, about what vision of the society would win and be dominant in future. At that time, traditional society in France had been shaken to its foundations so that it gradually would make room for a modern and democratic society. Liberals expressed their hope that the debate on Jedwabne would lead to a similar process in Poland. A well-known liberal writer, Marcin Król, claimed in the debate that Poland still is an anachronistic country with a neo-liberal economy. Therefore Jedwabne should be used to "modernize Polish mentality", to question Romantic myths and fight nationalism and xenophobia.<sup>66</sup> For the liberals, the Jedwabne debate showed that Poland still has a long way to go in order to become a modern democratic society. They were, however, determined to use the debate as an important beginning of the realisation of their societal vision.

Nationalistic and populist groupings that expressed their opinions in such papers as *Nasz Dziennik*, *Głos Polski*, *Mysł Polska*, and sometimes also *Tygodnik Solidarność*, had their own ideological interpretation of the Jedwabne affair. According to them Jedwabne was used in order to launch an attack on Polish interests, Poland's international reputation and Polishness as a value. They presented themselves as the defendants of Polishness under siege. As to the question who the enemy was, the answers varied. *Tygodnik Solidarność* and *Nasza Polska* accused its ideological opponents, the liberals and the left, of using Jedwabne to knock down such national values as religion and tradition that allegedly make Poles provincial, antisemitic, racist and intolerant. The aim of the liberals and the left was, according to the rightist writers, to turn the Poles into rootless people who would then be easily moulded by the prophets of so-called modern society.<sup>67</sup>

In the nationalistic press there were also plenty of other suggestions as to who was eager to raise the Jedwabne case and make use of it. A

number of writers in *Mysł Polska* (see for instance number 50, 2000) put forth the theory that it was Jews who thus wanted to force Poland to adopt a reprivatisation law more advantageous for them, and to pay them compensation for lost property. This thesis was subsequently echoed in the media in various forms. The head of the Polish Catholic Church, Cardinal Glemp, declared for example that "Gross's book was clearly written on commission".<sup>68</sup> Gross's book was presented as an example of the "Holocaust Industry" in the United States.<sup>69</sup> While the Jedwabne debate rolled on, Finkelstein's book with that title was translated into Polish.

The antisemitic stereotype of the Jew as Communist was highly alive in the nationalistic press writing on Jedwabne. An example thereof is Antoni Macierewicz who put forth the idea that the Jedwabne case was raised in order to conceal the role of the Jews in the establishment of Communism in Poland and the crimes of Jewish Communists against the Polish population. Those crimes would soon be revealed, he claimed, when the Institute for National Memory opened the archives of the Secret Service. The memory of Jedwabne would then make it politically impossible to point out the Jews as guilty and the secrecy about those crimes would continue. In his article Macierewicz compared the Kielce pogrom in 1946 and the Jedwabne pogrom. He reminded his readers that the Kielce pogrom had been used by the Communists in order to attack the opposition and accuse all of it of antisemitism, nationalism and "reactionary instincts". Through this comparison, Macierewicz implied that Jedwabne, too, was used in the political and ideological battle.<sup>70</sup>

The contribution by Macierewicz shows how the burdens of the Communist and the antisemitic legacy merged in the Jedwabne debate, and there were many such cases. For instance, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who belongs to the post-Communist coalition SLD, was attacked by his ideological opponents from the right after his speech during the ceremony in Jedwabne. He was refused the moral right to speak of the need for truth, while at the same time he and his party colleagues were eager that no one would investigate their Communist past. How could he condemn those who had persecuted the Jews in Jedwabne when he in his party protected those who had persecuted Jews in 1968?<sup>71</sup>

## Has Anything Changed? Some Conclusions

The analysis of the debate shows that Gross's book about Jedwabne became a real challenge for the collective memory of the Poles. The analysis also shows that different groups used the memory of Jedwabne with different aims. Historians wanted to establish facts and discuss various interpretations of the past (the scholarly use of history). They were encouraged by broad groups in society who were eager to deal with the lies and silences in history writing, to rehabilitate victims and seek reconciliation (the moral use of history). Groups within the political élite and intellectuals used the memory of Jedwabne in order to give legitimacy to their ideas and visions of society and/or acquire a positive political image at home and abroad (the ideological and political use of history). Perhaps the most important function of the use of history in this context was that it became the catalyst for a broad discussion, albeit led by intellectuals, about Polish national identity, its contents and its future (the existential use of history).

By documenting and presenting the story of the Jedwabne pogrom in 1941, Jan Gross has delivered a new resource for Polish collective memory. This new resource was powerful because of its emotional charge and its provocative message – the accusation of having taken part in the Holocaust. The actor in the workshop of memory – Gross himself – was also difficult to disregard because of his status as professor at a renowned American university and his ability to influence the image of Poland abroad with his publications. The "demonstration effect" might also have played a part: people working in Polish media could have been influenced by the important historical debate on the Holocaust in France, Germany and Scandinavia that took place just shortly before the Jedwabne affair. It may, however, be asked whether all these factors would have been sufficient to make the Poles use this new memory resource. Several American scholars had already written about antisemitism in Poland, including even Jan Gross himself, without gaining the attention of Polish society. Even in Poland, as mentioned, a number of publications had already appeared since the late 1980s, i.e., before *Neighbours*, which challenged the Poles' memory of the Holocaust. Moreover, in 1988, in fact, an article was published in the regional paper *Koniakry* about the Jedwabne

pogrom, and this article passed unnoticed. The reactions followed only after *Neighbours* in 2000. It would seem that it was only then, after more than a decade of major political, social and sociopsychological upheavals, that a series of needs appeared which the use of the memory of Polish-Jewish relations could fill.

Thus the discussion of the traumatised memory was rendered possible through an interaction of the actors (Gross published his book which gained the attention of the media) and changed conditions in society. It had taken more than ten years of freedom and normalisation of life in society, ten years of freedom of speech and democracy building before the Poles were able to discuss these sensitive questions which touch upon their national identity. The British historian Timothy Garton Ash claimed in a comment to the Jedwabne debate (in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 1, 2001) that it even took Poland's NATO membership to stop the Poles from viewing themselves as the victims of history. They needed to feel that their democracy was strong and stable enough before they could confront the dark pages of their history. You have to feel secure before you dare to question yourself, which the Poles have dared in the Jedwabne debate. More than a decade has passed since Poland became a free country, and this time has also successively prepared society for a reevaluation of old national myths and representations. There is no longer the same need for them as during the years of oppression, when it was crucial to maintain cohesion in society and a readiness to fight. Moreover, the young generation that has grown up after 1989 and hardly remembers Communist times has not the same emotional attachment to those myths as their parents and grandparents had. This generation is inclined to revolt against them. It also wants to search into that part of the past that the older generation wanted to keep hidden for them. Without the experience of antisemitic manipulations during the Communist time, the young generation does not perceive the subject as being as sensitive as their parents do.

Collective memory and collective identity interact. The members of a society can use resources from the collective memory in order to try to change the collective identity of their society, but changes to identity caused by changed conditions in society also influence what we choose to use from our collective memory. Polish society during

the last ten years has gone through rapid changes and new challenges are on their way in conjunction with the expected EU membership. The Polish intellectual élite is holding discussions as to the compatibility of Polish national identity with modern society, what is called "Europeanisation". They want Poland to be seen in Europe and in the world as a modern, democratic, open society. They already identify with (and want to be identified as) Europeans, and Europe for them means, among other things, a community of such values as freedom, democracy and tolerance.<sup>72</sup> For this reason they could not refuse to rise to the challenge that Gross's book constituted, namely to deal with the legacy of antisemitism. An article in the *Financial Times* (February 12, 2001) commenting on the Polish Jedwabne debate starts with the statement: "Just as it should be focusing its energy on joining the EU Poland remains mired in unfinished historical business of the 20th century." What the author has missed is that the Polish debate in fact was an expression of the energy focused by Poland (or rather its élite) on becoming an integral part of Europe and an EU member.

An important question that this analysis of the debate has attempted to answer is whether the debate implied a transformation in Polish collective memory and historical consciousness. In my view it is justified to say after the Jedwabne debate that a certain transformation has taken place. Gross's book is a new resource in Polish collective memory. Henceforth, it is not possible to discuss the Holocaust in Poland without taking the events in Jedwabne into account. However, it is still too early to claim that the memory of Jedwabne has changed the Poles' historical consciousness. A confirmation of this thesis can be found in an opinion poll conducted in the autumn of 2001 by CBOS (the Polish Bureau of Statistics) among one thousand randomly chosen Poles. When asked if they had heard about Jedwabne 90 per cent answered in the affirmative, which confirms the impression that the media devoted considerable space to the Jedwabne affair. As for the question who had killed the Jedwabne Jews, 28 per cent answered the Germans, 12 per cent claimed that it was the Germans assisted by Poles, 9 per cent considered that both Poles and Germans were responsible for the deed, 8 per cent said that the whole responsibility was on the part of the Poles, 5 per cent thought it was other groups,

for instance Russians, that had killed the Jews, 4 per cent believed that the murderers were Poles but forced by Germans, and about 30 per cent replied that they did not know who committed the crime.<sup>73</sup>

Thus it was only a tiny minority of people questioned that was prepared to accept the fact that the Poles should take upon themselves the whole responsibility for the crime. Naturally, one has to be cautious with drawing too far-reaching conclusions from the results of the survey. The result confirms, however, the impression from the analysis of the debate, namely that it was the Polish intellectual élite and partly its political élite that stood for a changed historical consciousness. Yet they spoke with a strong voice and made an impression both on the observers of the debate and on those who took part in it.<sup>74</sup> The memory of Jedwabne has been internalised in the consciousness of the intellectual élite, and it is now up to them to try to influence the public so that they too make this memory their own. For that, new actions are needed – first and foremost at school (new history books for a start) and in the media. It is the task of the élite to keep the debate on Jedwabne alive. The transformation of Polish historical consciousness and the dealing with the legacy of antisemitism is on its way, but it has not occurred so far.

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This text is a considerably extended version of my article "Jedwabne – en utmaning för polackernas kollektiva minne", published in Swedish in *Historiska tidskriften* 2003:3. It has been translated from Swedish by Margareta Faust, Ph.D.

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The following Polish papers and periodicals are mentioned in the article:

*Dzieje Najnowsze* – a scholarly review published by the History Department of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and the University College of Humanities in Pułusk.  
*Gazeta Wyborcza* – daily with the highest circulation throughout Poland, liberal in the American sense.  
*Głos* – nationalistic, Catholic weekly on issues in society.

*Konспект* – quarterly for academic cultural debate, published by the Teachers' Training College in Kraków.

*Mysł Polska* – nationalistic, news magazine.

*Nasz Dziennik* – daily, nationalistic and Catholic, populist with a broad circulation.

*Nasza Polska* – nationalistic weekly on political and cultural issues.

*Nowy Dziennik* – daily for Poles living in the United States, conservative.

*Polityka* – weekly news digest with the second largest circulation, liberal in the American sense.

*Res Publica* – liberal monthly on political and cultural issues.

*Rzeczpospolita* – one of Poland's largest dailies, liberal.

*Tygodnik Powszechny* – Catholic intellectual weekly on political and cultural issues.

*Tygodnik Solidarność* – nationalistic weekly, mainly on political issues.

*Więź* – Catholic intellectual monthly on cultural issues.

*Wprost* – weekly liberal news digest with the largest circulation.

*Znak* – Catholic intellectual monthly on social and cultural issues.

*Życie* – daily, conservative.

## Notes

- 1 The history of the Soviet occupation of Poland in 1939–41 was a subject of Jan Gross's earlier research. He is known as an author of the historical works *Revolution from Abroad. Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988, and *W czterdziestym nas matkę na Sybir zeszali. Polska a Rosja 1939–42* ("In 1940, mother, they sent us to Siberia: Poles in Russia 1939–42"), London: Aneks 1983, the latter written with Irena Grudzińska-Gross.
- 2 The testimonies were given and documented in 1945 to representatives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. They are also to be found in the *Jedwabne Memorial Book*, published in 1980 in the USA and in Israel.
- 3 These interviews were conducted in the 1990s, both by Agnieszka Arnold who made a film about Jedwabne and by Gross himself.
- 4 The address of the website is [www.pogranicze.sejny.pl/jedwabne](http://www.pogranicze.sejny.pl/jedwabne).
- 5 To those who do not read Polish and want to get an insight into the debate I recommend a special issue of the Catholic magazine *Więź* with the title "Thou shalt not kill", published in 2001 with a number of articles from the Polish press translated into English.
- 6 A short description of these papers and magazines can be found at the end of this article.
- 7 For an example of the scholarly discussion on *Neighbours* abroad, see *Slavic Review* 2002:3.
- 8 In the formulation of my reasoning about collective memory I have been inspired by Iwona Irwing-Zarecka's *Frames of Remembrance. The Dynamics of Collective Memory*, New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers 1994, and regarding the notion of "historical consciousness" by Jörn Rüsen, "Holocaust Memory and Identity Building: Metahistorical Considerations in the Case of (West) Germany", in Michael S. Roth & Charles G. Salas (eds), *Disturbing Remains. Memory History and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*, Los Angeles: The Gerny Research Institute Publication Programs 2001.
- 9 Klas-Göran Karlsson, *Historia som vapen. Historiebruk och Sverigemonens upplösning 1985–1995*, Stockholm: Natur och Kultur 1999, p. 57. See also his introduction to this book.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 See for instance Tomasz Strzembosz in the discussion "Jedwabne – zbrodnia i pamięć" ("Jedwabne – Crime and Memory"), *Rzeczpospolita*, March 3, 2001. Strzembosz is a history professor, well-known for his publications on Poland during the Soviet occupation 1939–1941, a subject that was taboo in Communist Poland.
- 12 See for instance Jan Błotński, *Biedni Polacy parzą na getto*, Kraków: Wyd. Literackie 1996; Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, New York: Syracuse 1997; Feliks Tylich, *Długi cień zagłady*, Warszawa: ŻIH 1999; Jan Gross, *Upiorna dekada*, Kraków: Universitas 1998; Maria Janion, *Do Europy tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi*, Warsaw: Siel 2000, "Shoah. Pamięć zagrożona", thematic issue of the review *Znak* 2000:6, "Under one heaven" special issue of the review *Więź* 1998, articles from *Polin* (Historical Review on Polish-Jewish Relations).

- 13 There are several testimonials on this matter, see for instance in Feliks Tylich, *Długi cień zagłady*, Warsaw: ŻIH 1999, pp. 63–67.
- 14 Krystyna Kersten, *Żydzi Polacy Komunizm. Anatomia współpracy 1939–68*, Warszawa: NOW 1992, pp. 89–142.
- 15 This is pointed out by Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, New York: Syracuse 1997, p. 32.
- 16 According to most recent estimates 960,000 Jews, 73,000 Poles, 21,000 Gypsies, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war and about 15,000 people of other nationalities died in Auschwitz-Birkenau. A Polish opinion poll from 1995 shows, however, that about 47 per cent of Poles still believe that Auschwitz was first and foremost a place where Poles were tortured and executed, while only 8 per cent believe that the majority of victims were Jewish. See Michael C. Steinlauf, p. 141.
- 17 Michael C. Steinlauf, p. 81.
- 18 As support for this thesis, Michael C. Steinlauf refers to the psychiatrist Jay Lifton's theories about "psychic numbing" which can be caused by "death guilt". See p. 57.
- 19 See Jacek Kuroń, "Nienawisć do ofiary" ("Hatred Towards the Victim"), conversation with J.T. Lipski in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 16, 2000.
- 20 Michael C. Steinlauf, p. 59.
- 21 See for instance Marek Zaleski & Marcin Król in the discussion "Akt skruczy i co dalej" ("The Act of Repentance and Then What?"), *Res Publica*, July 7, 2001.
- 22 The stereotype was already earlier propagated by the Endecja party, but grew strong during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920–1921. The small Polish Communist party then wanted Poland to become a part of Communist Russia. The Communists of Jewish origin were prominent among leaders of this party, something that Endecja did not omit to point out.
- 23 See Kersten Krystyna & Jerzy Szapiro, "The Contexts of the So-called Jewish Question in Poland after World War II", *Polin* 1989, v. 4, p. 261.
- 24 Even when Gross's *Neighbours* was published in democratic Poland in 2000 a number of intellectuals reacted with the same fear, see for instance Jacek Żakowski, "Każdy sąsiad ma imię" ("Every Neighbour has a Name"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 18–19, 2000.
- 25 This special issue of *Więź* was published in English in the same year with the title *Under One Heaven*.
- 26 See the interview with Tomasz Szarota with the title "Diabeł tkwi w szczegółach" ("The Devil is in the Details"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 18–19, 2000. The interview already contained the main critical scholar arguments that, subsequently refined, occurred in the debate. In the same year as Gross (i.e. 2000), Szarota published a book on the pogroms of Jews in occupied Europe: *Upiór zagłady. Zajęcia antyżydowskie w okupowanej Europie: Warszawa, Paryż, Amsterdam, Antwerpia, Kowno*.
- 27 See Jan Gross, *Sprzeczek*, Sejny: Pogranicze 2000, p. 100.
- 28 Musiał achieved international repute through his scholarly articles where he demonstrated that the exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht included some material which in fact showed the crimes of the NKVD.
- 29 See Bogdan Musiał's review of Gross's *Neighbours* in *Dzieje Najnowsze* 2001:3.
- 30 This Institute was founded at the end of the 1990s in order to manage secret

archives from the Communist years and establish the conditions for research on Poland's history between 1939 and 1989. At present, the Institute has on its hands 105 investigations of Nazi crimes, 407 investigations of Communist crimes and 28 labelled as "crimes against humanity".

- 31 See for example Krzysztof Jasiewicz, "Sąsiedzi niebadani" ("Uninvestigated Neighbours"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 9–10, 2000. According to him this picture emerges from testimonials given by Polish victims of Soviet deportations to Gulag 1939–1941, gathered in the Hoover Archives.
- 32 See the discussion "Jedwabne – zbrodnia i pamięć" ("Jedwabne – Crime and Memory"), *Rzeczpospolita*, March 3, 2001.
- 33 See for example his article "Nie było rozkazu" ("There Was No Order Given"), *Rzeczpospolita*, January 4, 2001 and his contribution to the discussion about Jedwabne in *Rzeczpospolita*, March 3, 2001.
- 34 In his article "Czy na pewno już wszystko wiemy?" ("Do We Know Everything for Certain?"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 2–3, 2000, Szarota mentioned violent attacks from many colleagues who considered his criticism of Gross immoral.
- 35 See for example Jan Gross, "Zrozumiałe morderstwo?" ("Comprehensible Murder?"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 25–26, 2000, interviews in *Wprost*, December 17, 2001 and in *Rzeczpospolita*, July 19, 2001.
- 36 Andrzej Echolette, "To wy macie przeprosić" ("You Have to Ask for Forgiveness"), *Nasza Polska*, December 5, 2000; Jerzy Robert Nowak, "Jak żydowski sąsiadzi tępił Polaków" ("How the Jewish Neighbours Persecuted the Poles"), *Głos*, March 3, 2001.
- 37 See for instance Robert Pucek, "O sensie odpowiedzialności" ("On the Sense of Responsibility"), *Rzeczpospolita*, February 13, 2001.
- 38 See his article "Problemy z terapią szokową" ("Problems with Shock Therapy"), *Rzeczpospolita*, January 5, 2001. In 2000 he published a book that gained considerable attention *Żydzi i Polacy 1918–1955. Współistnienie – zagłada – komunizm* ("Jews and Poles 1918–1955: Coexistence – Holocaust – Communism"), Warsaw: Fronda.
- 39 See his article "Każdy sąsiad ma imię" ("Each Neighbour has a Name"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 18–19, 2000.
- 40 See for instance the articles by Czajkowski, Wilkanowicz, Magdziak-Miszewska and others, published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Znak* and *Więź* in 2000–2001.
- 41 An example thereof is Archbishop Józef Zyciński's article "Banalizacja barbarzyństwa" ("The Banalisation of Barbarism"), *Więź*, March 2001.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 See his article "To nie oni niestery" ("Unfortunately, It was Not They"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 15, 2000.
- 44 Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, "Potrzeba zadośćuczynienia" ("A Need for Compensation"), *Rzeczpospolita*, January 26, 2001.
- 45 See Jerzy Jedlicki, "Jak się z tym uporać" ("How can you Deal with it?"), *Polityka*, February 10, 2001. Cf. Halina Bornowska, "Gdy sąsiad nie ma imienia" ("When the Neighbour has no Name"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 27–28, 2001, and Barbara Enkelking Boni in an interview with Israel Guman, "Odwaga zbrodni" ("The Courage of the Crime"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 9, 2001.

- 46 Stefan Wilkanowicz, "Kilka myśli o odpowiedzialności i patriotyzmie" ("A Few Thoughts About Responsibility and Patriotism"), *Znak*, February 2001.
- 47 Speech by President Kwaśniewski published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 11, 2001.
- 48 Klas-Göran Karlsson, pp. 57–58.
- 49 See for instance Helena Nelken, "Homo homini lupus est", *Nowy Dziennik*, January 19, 2001.
- 50 Agnieszka Magdziak-Miszewska, "Najpoważniejszy egzamin" ("The Most Serious Examination"), *Więź*, April 2001.
- 51 Quotation from "Rota" ("The Oath"), one of the best known Polish patriotic songs, written in the form of a pledge to Poland, its traditions, language and faith. Reported in *Więź*, April 2001.
- 52 See for instance Jacek Wegner, "Anypatie Grossa", *Tygodnik Solidarność*, August 17, 2001.
- 53 See for instance Andrzej Nowak, "Westerplatte czy Jedwabne" ("Westerplatte or Jedwabne"), *Rzeczpospolita*, August 1, 2001.
- 54 See for instance Jerzy Jedlicki in op.cit.; Paweł Machcewicz "W cieniu Jedwabnego" ("In the Shadow of Jedwabne"), *Rzeczpospolita*, December 11, 2000.
- 55 Krystyna Skarżyńska "Zbiorowa wyobraźnia, zbiorowa wina" ("Collective Imagination – Collective Guilt"), *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 24, 2000.
- 57 Krystyna Skarżyńska ibid.; Dariusz Czaja, op.cit.
- 58 Zdzisław Krasnodębski, "Czerń w Jedwabnem" ("The Mob in Jedwabne"), *Znak*, February 2001.
- 59 This was pointed out by Jörn Rüsen, who writes about memory and identity: "The historical presentation of identity mainly follows the logic of ethnocentrism: it centres one's familiar origins and development around positive values and at the same time exteriorises negative experiences and threats into the otherness of the others. The ethnocentrism is universal in time and space"; see Jörn Rüsen, "Historical Objectivity as a Matter of Social Values", in Joep Leerssen & Ann Rigney (eds), *Historians and Social Values*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2000, p. 62.
- 60 See his article "Czas pokuty" ("A Time for Penance"), *Wprost*, December 3, 2000.
- 61 See Zdzisław Krasnodębski, "O potrzebie goryczy" ("On the Need for Bitterness"), *Rzeczpospolita*, August 11, 2001.
- 62 The plaint also contained a number of other accusations which led to protests from the Polish side, and the plaintiffs eventually withdrew it. It was extensively commented upon in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 9, 1999, among others by Adam Michnik who criticised it in the article "Kłamstwo w cieniu Shoah" ("Lies in the Shadow of the Shoah").
- 63 See Jan Nowak-Jeziorański op.cit.
- 64 See for instance the interview with Leon Kieres in *Rzeczpospolita*, February 17, 2001.
- 65 Andrzej Leder, "Jedwabne: polska sprawa Dreyfusa" ("Jedwabne – the Polish Dreyfus Affair"), *Res Publica*, July 7, 2001.
- 66 Marcin Król, "Jedwabne: historia i pamięć" ("Jedwabne – History and Memory"), *Res Publica*, July 7, 2001.

- 67 See for instance Leon Kalewski, "Opowieści niesamowite" ("Incredible Stories"), *Nasza Polska*, November 21, 2000.
- 68 Krzysztof Dąbrowski, "Komercjalizacja, wulgaryzacja" ("Commercialisation, Vulgarisation"), *Rzeczpospolita*, September 8, 2001.
- 69 See for instance Leszek Czajkowski, "Jedwabny interes" ("The Jedwabne Business"), *Nasza Polska*, January 16, 2001.
- 70 Antoni Macierewicz, "Revolucja nihilizmu" ("The Revolution of Nihilism"), *Głos*, February 3, 2001.
- 71 Tomasz Strzembosz, "Nieświadomy antysemityzm" ("Unconscious Antisemitism"), *Tygodnik Solidarność*, August 3, 2001.
- 72 For a historical analysis of the Polish discourse on Europe, see Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, "The Complex of an Unwanted Child: The Meanings of Europe in Polish Discourse", in Bo Stråth & Mikael af Malmberg (eds), *Meanings of Europe. Variety and Contention within and among Nations*, London: Berg Publishers 2002, pp. 215-241.
- 73 For the results see *Gazeta Wyborcza*, September 7, 2001.
- 74 See for instance Jan Gross's judgement of the debate in *Konspet* nr 8, 2001.

TOMAS SNIEGON

## Their Genocide, or Ours?

### The Holocaust as a Litmus Test of Czech and Slovak Identities

Although the dissolution of the Czechoslovak state at the end of 1992 did not come unexpectedly, the speed of the disintegration process took many people by surprise. The political situation changed quickly. Until the end of 1989, Czechoslovakia was a Communist state, strongly dependent on the Soviet Union. In 1990, Communist rule was replaced by a new-born democracy. It was the so-called Velvet Revolution. However, already on January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia split into two separate, independent states, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The Velvet Revolution reached its peak in a Velvet Divorce which was as peaceful as the rest of the "velvet" process.

Revolutionary changes affected almost all aspects of everybody's life. The old system died after several decades of stagnation. Newly gained freedom of speech and press, freedom of travel, freedom of enterprise and freedom to choose different political parties suddenly offered the people of Czechoslovakia new opportunities, but also increased competition, social stress and increased confrontation with the surrounding world. In such an atmosphere, old values and certainties were continuously challenged and redefined, while new values were still waiting to be born or developed. Thus, the Velvet Revolution was not merely a political, ideological and socio-economic revolution, but also a cultural and mental revolution.

In this situation, where hopes for a brighter future were salient, history was not made a passive residual. On the contrary, it played a very active role in orientating individuals and social groups in