

THE NEIGHBOURS' FEAR*

ANTI-SEMITISM IN POLAND BEFORE AND AFTER WORLD WAR II

Mid-August a letter arrived via the Internet, in which the Polish member of the Management Board of the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency turned to the other national delegates of the body, the writer of the present review included. The author of the letter did not write in his capacity as a private person, since the Agency is an international institution of public law, the members of its board are delegated by national governments and the contents of the letter, too, touched upon public affairs. I thus believe that I can divulge the contents of the letter to the reader without violating the secrecy of correspondence. The Polish colleague called attention to an op-ed published in the 26th June edition of *The Times* in London, and asked for the other board members' opinion as to potential countermeasures. The impugned article was penned by Giles Coren, who has been a columnist for the respectable daily for almost a decade, and it noted that the author's émigré Polish Jewish family—who had left their original homeland to save their lives—still do not return there on account of the vibrant anti-Semitism, not even for a visit.¹ Coren describes this personal sentiment, which he is indisputably entitled to, with the following unacceptably general words: "We Corens are here [in emigration—G.H.], now, because the ancestors of these Poles now going home used to amuse themselves at Easter by locking Jews in the synagogue and setting fire to it."

Board members from several countries agreed with the Polish colleague that this manifestation of "verbal aggression" calls for measures by the Agency. In justifying his call for a collective response, the representative from Cyprus went as far as to claim that it is not even certain that what Coren stated with regard to his past had taken place at all. In the unfolding debate, I—while emphasising that the generalisation employed by the journalist was unacceptable² but at the same time also protected as an opinion falling under the freedom of expression—

sought to convince the colleague from Cyprus, who appeared to have a tendency for relativisation, of the facts of Polish anti-Semitism both during and after World War II, and its role in explaining disillusionment, though not prejudice.

Jan T. Gross, currently a professor of history at Princeton University, is himself an emigrant of Jewish descent. He was an activist in the democratic student movement in Poland in the 1960s, an activity that led to his incarceration for six months. He finally left his country in 1968, when as a result of a grand scale anti-Semitic campaign by the Polish United Workers' Party almost all the 250 thousand Jews who had survived the holocaust—out of 3.5 million before the war—left Poland, thereby realising Hitler's diabolical plan of a Poland completely cleansed of Jews (*Judenrein*). What happened subsequently is best described with the term used by Paul Lendvai, a political commentator of Hungarian descent: "anti-Semitism without Jews".³

Neighbors,⁴ the first of the two historical essays published by Gross—first in Polish in 2000 and then in English a year later—, tells the story of how, as the author puts it in the introduction of his book, "one day, in July 1941, half of the population of a small East European town murdered the other half—some 1,600 men, women, and children".⁵ A significant portion were murdered—and Coren's harsh words obviously allude to this—after being driven into a shed in which they were burned alive. What makes the incident especially shocking is that even though the Russian occupiers in the north-eastern Polish village had in the meanwhile been replaced by Germans, and the German troops stationed in the area were presumably apprised of the planned operation, the cruel slaughter nevertheless took place without their participation.⁶ Thus it was truly neighbours killing neighbours, one Polish citizens murdering another, the Jew. Only a single family sought to help the victims and ultimately it,

* Jan T. GROSS, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001) and Jan T. GROSS, *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York 2007).

The text was published originally in Hungarian: HALMAI Gábor, 'A szomszédok félelme. Antiszemitizmus Lengyelországban a második világháború alatt és után' [2008] 3 *Fundamentum* 139–143.

too—similarly to the Coren family—had to flee to the West. They now live in the United States.

The book triggered an intense scientific and political debate in Poland, but the scientific dialogue also moved beyond the country's boundaries. Adam Czarnota, who summarised the scientific debate in Poland, fundamentally distinguishes four different viewpoints.⁷ Those who represent an accepting position—interestingly, none of these are historians—verify the assertions in the book and do not consider the crime of Jedwabne an isolated incident but an episode of the Holocaust.

Those voicing cautiously accepting positions acknowledge both, the facts of the mass murder as well as that it was committed by Poles, but criticise certain findings in the book and believe that the author should have undertaken a deeper analysis of Polish-Jewish relations and the entire era of war and occupation. Among them is a thorough analyst of Gross' book, István Deák, a historian of Hungarian descent at Columbia University.⁸ Deák shares Gross understanding for the fact that Jews celebrated the Soviets as liberators in September 1939, for instance. Deák also defends Gross from his critics when he notes that Gross does not equate the behaviour of Poles in Jedwabne with those of all Poles. Still, Deák also criticises Gross for his unfortunate choice of words, according to which "*the so-called local population involved in killings of Jews out of its own free will*" [italics in the original].⁹ Such a strong formulation of collective responsibility is strongly reminiscent of the approach in Daniel Goldhagen's much disputed 1996 book,¹⁰ in which he labelled the German people "Hitler's willing executioners" and "special sort of murderers".¹¹ This approach—which Deák rightfully subjects to criticism—is very similar to the impermissible generalisation by *The Times's* columnist mentioned in the introduction. Deák—while he emphatically stresses Gross's credit in awakening Polish public opinion to one of the dark episodes in the country's national history—makes another important critical observation: *Neighbors* does not provide a sufficiently convincing explanation concerning the particular reasons for the killings undertaken by neighbours, which distinguish this massacre from pogroms that occurred elsewhere—Austria, Lithuania, the Ukraine and Romania. In this respect he also notes an interesting distinctive feature in the Hungarian population's behaviour towards the domestic Jewry. This circumstance is that here it was the Hungarian authorities that executed the murders or delivered their compatriots into the hands of a foreign power, and hence there was little room for popular participation. Still, your reviewer ought to

add that the voluntarily conscripted Hungarian Arrow Cross members truly proved to be "Hitler willing executioners".

Those who close rank in countering the attack seek to move the emphasis of the debate from the real crimes committed against Jews to such underlying motivations as the moral collapse of society at the time of war, the almost two years of Soviet occupation, the political status of Polish Jews under Soviet and then Nazi occupation, and the alleged Nazi role in the execution of the crime. Those who espouse such a position believe that in his book Jan Gross devotes too little attention to the horrors of Soviet occupation in Eastern Poland, the region that was then attached to the two eastern Soviet republics. This horror had been persuasively portrayed in a previous book by the very same author.¹² Tomasz Strzembosz, a recognised historian of the Polish resistance movement during World War II, argues, for example, that Jews participated in disproportionately high numbers in Communist police actions and crimes.¹³ Counter Strzembosz's argument, however, Gross convincingly shows that in the county to which the town of Jedwabne belonged, Soviet repressive measures were negligible, and even in those incidents that did occur the Jews of Jedwabne were perfectly innocent.

Finally, numerous representatives of the Christian-Nationalist right comprehensively rejected Gross' statements, arguing that the crimes were not committed by Poles but by Germans.

Political views were at least as polarised. Alexander Kwasniewski, then the president of the Polish Republic, and Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek took part in a memorial with the mayor of Jedwabne in commemoration of the massacre's 60th anniversary.¹⁴ A group of Jedwabne residents, lead by the local priest, sought to disturb the event with loud music. Among those who rejected the book was Lech Walesa, the leader of Solidarity under the old regime, former president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who called Gross a mediocre writer and a Jew who was out to make money,¹⁵ as well as the Jedwabne town council, which dismissed the mayor who had participated in the commemoration.

Already in *Neighbors* Gross had indicated that even Auschwitz had not put an end to the murder of Jews by Poles. *Fear*, originally published in 2006, discusses exactly this violent anti-Semitism after World War II, manifested first in the Krakow pogrom of August 1945 and then in that of Kielce on 4th July 1946, where 43 Jews were killed (80 including those murdered in the surrounding areas), and the potential reasons behind it. According to

some estimates, already between the end of the war and the bloodbath of Kielce several hundred returning Jews were murdered by their Polish compatriots, many of them in the course of the brutal murders spreading on the railways. Gross himself estimates the number of Jewish victims in 1945-46 to be around 1500, which is close to the number murdered in Jedwabne. As a result, over 200 hundred thousand Jews had emigrated by 1947.¹⁶

The author presumably learned from the criticisms aimed at *Neighbors*—from critics that also included István Deák, as we noted above—and following a description of the events he devotes the major portion of his work to discussing the reactions and the potential reasons. As far as the immediate antecedents of the bloody events in Kielce are concerned, here is what is known: a boy who had strayed from home but was found relatively quickly, made up—presumably in fear of his parents angry reaction—a story according to which he had been held captive in the—non-existing—basement of a house inhabited by Jews who had returned from concentration camps but found that their compatriots had deprived them of their residence. The news that the Jews had been preparing for a ritual murder spread through the town like wildfire. An angry mob stormed the building in question and murdered the majority of its residents, but the massacre also extended to other buildings inhabited by Jews. In addition to several hundred workers from a local factory, the police that was sent to restore order also participated in the killings. In one of the saddest episodes described in the book, three Poles, among them an off duty police officer, gathered a few Jews from the area whom they personally knew, including a young woman with a baby in her arms, and with a lorry they stopped at random, carted their victims off to the woods outside Kielce and murdered them. After executing the mother, they shot her child in the head, too, which the murdering policeman later commented was necessary anyway, since it had been crying for its mother. They had informed the driver of the purpose of their ride, who had assented in return for some compensation.¹⁷

The contemporary reactions to the pogrom from governmental bodies, parties and the Catholic Church were equivocal to say the least. Especially the reactions—or rather lack thereof—of the communist party and the Catholic Church reflected the fears of these organisations that they might lose their anti-Semitic supporters. Though the Communists planned to issue a statement condemning the events, they refrained from doing so in light of the intense worker protests (in Lodz alone 16 thousand

workers went on strike to demand the withdrawal of the planned memorandum). Instead, in searching for the reasons behind the event, the party determined that they are to be found in the insufficiently productive lifestyle pursued by Jews. For quite a while, the Catholic Church maintained a silence regarding the events, and in its later statements it designated the Jews' attraction to communism and Zionism as the reasons for the violence. Indisputably, Gross' otherwise justified criticism of the church once again does not lack for generalisations, and the language employed in his book is even harsher than in *Neighbors*. At one point he speaks outright of the "theological cannibalism of the majority of the Bishops' Conference in Poland" in connection with Kielce. At the same time, he mentions as a positive example the courageous position taken by the bishop of Czestochowa, who condemned all allegations of ritual murder as mendacious.

The often provocative style has obviously provided ample ammunition to rightwing critics to launch even more fervent attacks—if that is possible—against the author following the publication of the book in Poland, naturally fundamentally on account of the contents of the study.¹⁸ It is still more sad that in the spring of 2007 the parties supporting the Kaczynski government, which was in power at the time the book was published in Poland, voted for and adopted a bill—partly with the ulterior motive of punishing Gross—proposed by the extremist League of Polish Families, which threatened with a three years loss of liberty any person who "publicly defames the Polish nation by accusing it of participation in Communist or Nazi crimes, of organising these or being responsible for them". The criminal proceeding initiated on the day of the book's release was terminated on the day after the fall of the Kaczynski government.¹⁹

The book's penultimate chapter entitled Judeo-Communism ("Zydokomuna" in the original) and the last chapter containing the conclusions search for the reasons why such a substantial proportion of the Polish population turned against Polish Jewry, which had just survived the horrors of the holocaust, and not only sought to drive them out of the country, but even from among the ranks of the living.

The myth of Judeo-Communism seeks to explain and at the same time justify violent anti-Semitism by linking communism to Judaism, and hence regards anti-Jewish pogroms—Kielce among them—as manifestations of justified anti-communism. Gross rebuts with convincing arguments the notion that this xenophobic theory might explain either pre-war or the subsequent anti-Semitism. Data from

1930 suggests that of the over three million Jews in Poland, a mere 7000-7500 declared themselves to be communists, and they made up only a quarter of the small number of communist voters. Not only was the overwhelming majority of Jews non-communist, therefore, but at the same time only a minor proportion of communist voters was Jewish.²⁰ Moreover, just before the war, in 1938, the Soviet-dominated Komintern dissolved the Polish communist party. The majority of its leaders was sent to the Gulag and during the war Stalin—arguing that “Jews make bad soldiers”—sought to avoid drafting Jews into the army, which meant that even among the occupying Soviet troops there were hardly any Jews. These data make it difficult to accept arguments that want to justify anti-Semitism during and after the war with the communist leanings of Polish Jewry.

It is a different issue, Gross argues—wherein he is supported by István Deák, as we saw—that following the war those Jews who escaped Nazism and the violence of their compatriots became supporters of the new Polish state. In itself this did not turn them into communists, however, and data from the post-war period proves this: membership in the Polish communist party grew from 20 thousand in July 1944 to 235 thousand in December 1945, and it reached over half a million, 555 thousand, by early 1947, but the number of Jews among them were a mere 4 thousand at the end of 1946 and 7 thousand in May 1947.²¹ As Gross points out, in certain leading positions the proportion of Jews in the post-war period was higher than that. There are estimates, for example, that among the leaders of the Security Service up to 30 percent were Jews,²² but this ratio dropped significantly following the recurring anti-Semitic purges, up to the point that by 1968 Jews had disappeared not only from the services, but altogether from the country. Nevertheless—and this strikingly illustrates the phenomenon of “anti-Semitism without Jews”—according to a national public opinion survey in 2004, 40 percent of respondents still believed that the country was run by Jews.²³

As persuasive as Gross’ reasoning is when he argues that Judeo-Communism does not explain anti-Semitic aggression against Jews in the Poland after Auschwitz, as unconvincing is his speculation regarding the real reasons. His explanations are more psychological in nature than social, which in the case of a social historian appears to be a sign of being at a loss. The most important reason according to Gross—which also gave the book its title—is the existential fear of Poles—who felt guilty because of their wartime behaviour—of the return of those Jews who had survived the Holocaust to their

social position and their desire to regain their property. To further explain the violence during the war, Gross adds that the serious crimes that individual Poles committed against their own compatriots could not have happened without Nazi occupation. But leaning on Jan Karski he also adds that there was a “genuine agreement” between occupiers and a significant portion of occupied Poles that the killing of Jews was permitted.²⁴ This also might have contributed to the phenomenon that Gross—borrowing from Jane Goodall²⁵—calls “pseudo- or cultural speciation”. The distinguishing feature of this behaviour, observed in chimpanzees, is that those exhibiting it regard their opponents as the representatives of another species, as many Poles looked upon their Jewish neighbours.²⁶ Gross also believes that the inhibitions of the Polish murderers may also have been lowered by the fact that in contrast with the French, Dutch or even the Hungarian population, they knew about the extermination of Jews by the Germans early on, in fact they were often eyewitnesses to it.

Gross is on yet more uncertain ground when he seeks to explain the reasons behind the post-war pogroms. He mentions the telling silence of the Catholic Church—which enjoyed widespread respect in the population—after Kielce as an important reason, as well as the consistent passivity of post-war Polish governments when it came to the restitution of Jewish property that had been expropriated by neighbours during the war. Gross’ uncertainty as to the real reasons is illustrated by his reference to one of Primo Levi’s stories, in which an SS-officer, queried as to the “why” Auschwitz happened, responds “no reason why” (“kein warum”). We Hungarians might recall a classical short story by István Örkény, the *In memoriam dr. K.H.G.*,²⁷ wherein K.H.G.,²⁸ who is digging a grave for a horse cadaver, recalls the name of Hölderlin, Heine, Schiller and Rilke to his German guard, who turns red with fury and shoots him.

Translated by Gábor Györi

NOTES

1. Giles COREN, ‘Two Waves of Immigration, Poles Apart. My Great-Grandfather Didn’t Leave His Home in the Hope of Finding a Better Life—Just a Life’ [2008] 6 July Times Online <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/giles_coren/article4399669.ece> accessed 8 January 2009.
2. In this respect I completely share the criticisms of the *Times* expressed in the editorial of the prestigious

- British weekly *The Economist*. 'Unacceptable Prejudice' <http://www.economist.com/daily/columns/europe-view/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11918619> accessed 8 January 2009.
3. Paul LENDVAI, *Anti-Semitism Without Jews; Communist Eastern Europe* (Doubleday, Garden City, NY 1971). Cited in Jan T. GROSS, *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York, Random House Trade Paperbacks 2007) Chapter 4, footnote 24, 284.
 4. Jan T. GROSS, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Fundacja Pogranicze, Sejny 2000) as well as Jan T. GROSS, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001)
 5. GROSS, *Neighbors* (n 4) 7.
 6. According to Gross' Hungarian critic, János Tischler, the Polish neighbours engaged in the bloody pogrom at the "behest" of the Germans. See: János TISCHLER, 'Ki a vámpír? A Félelem a Visztula mentén' [Who is the vampire? Fear along the Vistula] [2008] 8 March Magyar Narancs. The report of the Institute of National Memory on the official investigation of the Jedwabne crime also asserts that the Nazis are responsible for the heinous crime because they "quietly incited" it. Cited in Adam CZARNOTA, 'Az amnéziás lengyelek. Jan Thomas Gross lengyel fogadtatása' [The Polish community of amnesia. The Polish discussion of Jan Thomas Gross's] in Jan T. GROSS: *Szomszédok. A jedwabnei zsidók kiirtása* [Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne] (Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, Max Weber Alapítvány, Budapest 2004) 191.
 7. Adam CZARNOTA, 'The Polish Community of Amnesia. The Polish Discussion on Jan Thomas Gross' [2002] 1–2 East Central Europe/ECE. Also published as the postscript to the Hungarian edition of *Neighbors*.
 8. István DEÁK, 'Heroes and Victims' [2001] 31 May New York Review of Books.
 9. GROSS, *Neighbors* (n 4) 133.
 10. Daniel Jonah GOLDHAGEN, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Knopf, New York 1996).
 11. Deák also sees the similarities in approach in that the term "willing executioners" used in the title of Goldhagen's book (n 10) also appears on page 120 of the English edition of Gross's book.
 12. Jan T. GROSS, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1988).
 13. Tomasz STRZEMBOSZ, 'Collaboration Passed Over in Silence' *Rzeczpospolita* (27 January 2001) in Antony POLONSKY, Joanna B. MICHLIC, *The Neighbours Respond. The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, Oxford, Princeton University Press 2004) 220–236.
 14. See Kwaśniewski's speech at the ceremony: Address by President of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski at the Ceremonies in Jedwabne Marking the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Jedwabne Tragedy on 10 July 2001, in POLONSKY, MICHLIC (n 13) 130–132. Prime Minister Buzek issued a special statement on the Jedwabne tragedy: 'Living in Truth: Special Statement by Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek regarding the Slaughter of Jews in Jedwabne in 1941, April 2001' in POLONSKY, MICHLIC: (n 13) 125.
 15. Tony Judt cites the contents of a radio statement in: 'The House of the Dead: On Modern European Memory [2005] 2 October New York Review of Books.
 16. As I noted, the last great emigration wave was a result of the 1968 anti-Semitic campaign by the communists, which was when Gross also chose a new homeland.
 17. In some of its elements this tragic case is reminiscent of the scene in the Tibor Cseres' novel *Cold Days*, in which the commander of the gendarmes patrolling the streets in the Voivodina in January 1942 stops a lorry and asks the drivers to take a woman and a boy, who have Serbian names but are presumed to be Jewish, down to the shore of the Danube, where by then the executions are well underway [(Magvető, Budapest 1965) 196–197]. The commander—one of the few characters mentioned by his real name in the novel—was Sándor Képíró, who was first convicted in 1944 and then acquitted. A similar story is described by the historian Enikő Sajti, which she based on a witness testimony from the trial and described in the 1st February 2007 edition of the radio-show called Kontra, in the Hungarian station Klub Rádió. According to this story, Képíró sent some fifty prisoners with an intercepted lorry to the shore that served as an execution ground. (Tibor Cseres presumably read the trial documents and partly used them in writing his novel). Though Képíró was once again convicted in 1946, probably because of his role in the deportations of 1944, he was no longer in Hungary at the time and, moreover, the verdict has disappeared without a trace, too; that is the former gendarmerie office, who presumably committed war crimes for which there is no statute of limitations, never spent a day in prison and lives in Budapest even today.
 18. These are discussed in detail in János Tischler's writing (n 6). Among these the harshest criticisms is that of Janusz Kurtyka, the president of the National Remembrance Institute, who in an interview referred to Gross as "unscientific, extremely tendentious, a faux historian and a vampire of historiography".
 19. See Tischler (n 6).

20. Compare GROSS (n 3) 199–200.
21. GROSS (n 3) 221–222.
22. GROSS (n 3) 298. The evidence unearthed by Gross shows that members of the national security services—which was thus partially run by Jews—also participated in the Kielce pogrom.
23. See the report published in the 18th January 2004 edition of the popular weekly *Wprost*. Cited in GROSS (n 3) 199.
24. See Jan KARSKI, 'The Jewish Problem in Poland Under the Occupation' [1992] November *Mowia Wiecki* 2–9. Discussed in GROSS (n 3) 176–178.
25. Jane GOODALL (with Philip BERMAN), *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (Warner Books, New York 1999).
26. See GROSS (n 3) 254.
27. ÖRKÉNY István, *Egyperces novellák* [One-minute stories] (Budapest, Magvető 1977) 73.
28. Géza K. Havas was a journalist and critic of Jewish descent.