

## Poles and Humans

### Reflections on Jan T. Gross' *Neighbours* and the Ensuing Debate

Written for the Course *Approximations...*

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The publication of a slim volume by Jan T. Gross titled *Neighbours: the destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne, Poland*, first in its Polish original in 2000 and not much later in English, presenting and exploring the context of the Jedwabne massacre which, according to the words of the author, "dwarfs everything we previously imagined about the crimes committed by Poles against Jews during the war,"<sup>1</sup> provoked a flood of responses in Poland and also led to discussions in a number of other countries. A debate on an unprecedented scale emerged, dealing with the events of the Second World War on Polish territory and focusing mainly on the traumatic, complex and morally extremely sensitive topic of Polish-Jewish relations during these horrific years.<sup>2</sup> This paper aims to critically introduce this important and controversial work, present some of the disappointing weaknesses of the ensuing debate, and thereby reflect on more general problems related to the study of totalitarianism, fascism and the holocaust.

Jan T. Gross' book is a historical monograph in the first place that uncovers "who did what in a small town on a single day, on Jedwabne on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1941, and on whose orders."<sup>3</sup> *Neighbours* also includes a number of short, essayistic chapters reflecting on the Second World War and totalitarian rule, on the way to use sources as well as on Polish history and self-understanding, and the controversial issue of collective responsibility. Gross is keen on raising moral issues, and, somewhat curiously, he is pointing to irresolvable moral dilemmas while not refrain from recurrently passing judgement in evident words. He is simultaneously talking of an "unending flood of questions,"<sup>4</sup> arising from the "most shocking moral collapse,"

<sup>1</sup> Jan T. Gross, *Sosnowicki, A jedwabne zniszczenie kwerendy* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2004), p.125.

<sup>2</sup> The most significant previous debate was triggered by the publication of Jan Blonski's "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghettos" in the Cracow-based Catholic journal *Zygodnik Powszechny*, who "raised the issue of the guilt of Poles" and discussed how willing Poles had been to suppress such questions. [See András Pályi, "Lengyelök és zsidók," in András Pályi, *Szociális és zsidókérdés* (Bratislava: Kalligram Kiadó, 1998), pp. 396-399.] The article originally appeared in 1978. Though articles discussing such issues appeared in *Zygodnik Powszechny* throughout the 1980s, the time for a relatively open and widespread societal dialogue was not ripe. In English, see the translated articles in Antony Polonsky (ed.), 'My Brother's Keeper?' - *Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Gross, *Sosnowicki*, p.15.

when the "cultural taboo banning the killing of innocents broke down,"<sup>11</sup> and has clear intentions to shape our historical understanding by writing on "the faltering of the Polish cycle of myths," and their "running into the most stunning darkness."<sup>12</sup> What is peculiar is that Gross is both contemplative and assertive, and the tone of *Neighbors* is not constant.

Problematically, Gross does not always show measured judgement and, unfortunately, many of his conclusive statements are ambiguous. His investigation of the German/Nazi participation (and their share of the responsibility for the massacres) ends on an inconclusive note.<sup>13</sup> Still, at other points (significantly, already in his introduction), Gross is ready to state unambiguously that what happened was that "one half of the population massacred the other, 1600 people altogether."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, his discussion of local anti-Semitism is somewhat confusing and is neither differentiated, nor in-depth. Ultimately, the role he assigns to anti-Semitism in the motivation behind massacring the Jews of Jedwabne remains ambiguous. Gross pictures the Jedwabne community as integrated, pointing to the daily, unproblematic interactions of Jews and Gentiles over the years, but then he also needs to account for the divide that (somehow still) separated Gentiles from Jews. Can one claim that "objectively" there was no such divide, but "subjectively" this divide between them and the Jews was crucial for the Christians of Jedwabne? Perhaps this separation of objective versus subjective helps us in approximating the truth. Still, one certainly needs to ask further questions about this strange subjective world of Christians, and Gross fails to do so.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, it is preferable to conceive of people's anti-Semitic prejudices and their participation in massacres of Jewish people as two separate issues between which the connections are complicated.<sup>16</sup> It is perhaps helpful to introduce the (rather infamous) concept

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.156.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>16</sup> This point is made also by William W. Hagen in his review "A 'Poetic, Devilish Mixture' of Motives: Explanatory Strategy and Assignment of Meaning in Jan Gross's *Neighbors*." The review was published in the *Slavic Review* 61, no.3 (fall 2002), p.473.

<sup>17</sup> The need to separate the issues of Polish anti-Semitism and (partial) responsibility for the extermination of Jews during the Second World War was made by Jerzy Turowicz in his 1987 "Polish reasons and Jewish reasons" in Antony Polonsky (ed.), *My Brother's Keeper?: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.136-143. Turowicz is ready to admit an indirect connection between the two, but not a direct one (*ibid.*, pp.140-141). The complex ways the two were related is also what Adam Michnik aimed to show by quoting Zofia Kossak-Szczucka's 1942 article in the debate around the publication of *Neighbors*. See Adam Michnik "Poles and the Jews: How Deep the Guilt?" in Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, *The*

of (Jonah Goldhagen) "eliminationist anti-Semitism." The scope of people who can be labeled to have shared such a murderous predisposition towards Jews (and specifically towards Jews) was probably much more limited than Goldhagen maintains through his undue generalizations about Germans and their culture. In my view, this concept can be useful as long as it indicates that there was such a group among the perpetrators of the holocaust, who ought to be distinguished from mass murderers as well as anti-Semites, and even those who were both, but still no eliminationist anti-Semites as such.

To return to the ambiguities and weaknesses of Gross' work, worth noting is that throughout the book a number of keys are provided about the type of anti-Semitism of the locals, which included (besides the typical Christian prejudices against the Jews, medieval in origin) blaming the Jews for the war, or seeing in them "Jewish communists," but Gross does not systematically present the information on this question. Gross is right in dispelling the myth that Jewish collaboration in this area with the occupying Soviets could cause the emergence of the belief in the dreaded theory of Jewish-communism. Then again, who claimed that this theory was born after 1939? It is not clear whether Gross wishes to present this myth and allow it a place in his explanation, or simply discredit it as irrational, fantastic. Discussing the myth of Jewish communism, it is one thing that such beliefs were essentially unfounded, it is another to ask how pervasive they were [how much was the image of the Jews fused with those of communists (which could cause that the revenge for the suffering communists inflicted was taken out on innocent local Jews)?], which needs to be done when aiming to paint the background to the Jedwabne massacre. Gross' work is not sophisticated enough on the latter.

The problem whether it is preferable for scholars to conceive of anti-Semitism as rational or irrational has never been settled satisfyingly. Knowing some of the absurdities that its conception as rational leads to (famously illustrated by Arendt's exploration in this vein<sup>11</sup>), it appears better to present it as irrational (which is also intuitively easier, knowing the irrational excesses of anti-Semitism). But does this then allow for a sufficiently serious treatment of it,

*Neighbours Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.435. In his response to Michnik, Leon Wieseltier interpreted her words differently, see in them piety and poison. See Leon Wieseltier, "Washington Diarist: Righteous" in *ibid.*, p.441.

<sup>11</sup> János Pelle "A totalitarizmus öröksége" in János Pelle, *Antiszocializmus és totalitarizmus* (Budapest: Novotveg, 1999), p.84.

does it not (inevitably) end in the (justified but intellectually fruitless) refutation of it, in the provision of a critique of anti-Semitism rather than its explanation?

At one point Gross (surprisingly) writes that he thinks it very probably that the real driving force (behind committing this most shocking massacre) was the desire and sudden opportunity to plunder.<sup>12</sup> This would suggest, contrary to Gross' attempt to establish Polish responsibility and assign a crucial role to Polish anti-Semitism, that the Nazi "suggested calls" for mass murder against Jews might have been a central step on the road to this horrific event, and the fact that the Jews were murdered was enabled in the first place by gross immoralism and inhumanism and motivated by material interests. This does not contradict that this inhumanism could find exceptionally cruel forms of expression specifically towards Jewish fellow human beings. What I claim is if looting is viewed as a crucial drive behind the actions of the perpetrators, inhumanism seems to serve as a better term than anti-Semitism in accounting what motivated them and allowed for their actions. This is to state that Jedwabne Christians first had to believe that they were allowed to murder (which is the component of gross immoralism and inhumanism), so they could believe they were allowed to murder Jews (which is the component of anti-Semitism involved), not the other way round. Nazis might never have claimed murder could be "desirable" as such, they might only needed to have stated it was "desirable" to murder Jews, but the latter no doubt implied the former. Jedwabne Christians would not have murdered their Jewish neighbors without murder (of them) being "suddenly considered allowed," and this was a consequence of the Nazi conquest.

Someone can dehumanize individuals (supposedly) belonging to a "subhuman" group without ever considering murdering them. It requires another inhuman step to be ready to murder, and the two (in the concrete case of the Jedwabne massacre vicious anti-Semitism and murderous rage) ought not to be conflated, even if they so often appeared simultaneously in the events of the holocaust. This differentiation is not made consistently in *Neighbors*, Gross shifts from references to the one to the other.

The fact that the massacre appeared few weeks after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union and the invasion of the territory where Jedwabne is would require more consideration than Gross provides. He points to the issue of "support" for the Soviet Union versus support for Nazi

<sup>12</sup> Gross, *Neighbors*, p.103.

Germany,<sup>13</sup> which according to the known evidence divided the inhabitants of Jedwabne largely along Jewish versus non-Jewish lines. This controversial issue, including the Polish acts of greeting the Nazi conquerors (a strict taboo for long), ought to be given some more reflection. I feel that the Poles' sensation of liberation, belief in having ("miraculously") survived can potentially help accounting for the weakening of their critical faculties, not to mention the role the war played in rising levels of amorality and immorality. Gross glosses over the Poles' joy over believing that they will not be deported anymore. While the situations are not analogous, still a comparison can be made between this and the immediate post-war behavior of Jewish survivors of the holocaust, many of whom seem to have (at least temporarily) lost part of their critical faculties. Let me clarify that this argument is not about perpetration of crimes, but about people who acquiesced in their perpetration, and were unable to interfere or condemn (post-war communist immorality).<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, one of the most interesting and perplexing stories is the chasing away of Wyrzykowska, who hid and rescued a number of Jews during the war.<sup>15</sup> Not wishing to sound like providing an apology for the ones who could not tolerate her presence, I believe that their motivation could well have included a sense of enormous burden and guilt and the simultaneous willingness to deny responsibility and to forget.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, this does not excuse their actions as such, but allows for moral outrage and inability to face enormous moral challenges (of a kind most of us, fortunately, never had to confront) as potential causes of immoral behavior. It is all too easy to present this shocking event and play on people's immediate assumption that active, brutal anti-Semitism among Poles was its driving force.<sup>17</sup> There is no denying that this could well have played a large role in attacks on Wyrzykowska and her family. Still, the handling of this perplexing story illustrates well the type of criticism

<sup>13</sup> Instead of support (which implies positive attachment) it is more accurate to talk of less fear of Nazi Germany. It appears that while Jews were more threatened by Nazi Germany (and clearly had to be aware of this), Christian Poles hoped for better treatment by the Nazis when their territory was occupied in 1941.

<sup>14</sup> Let me add that the failure itself was not particularly Jewish. Non-Jews were similarly unable to do this unequivocally. My claim is rather that some who without experiencing (though surviving) the holocaust would have probably opposed Stalinist terror did not do so after their paralyzing experiences. This is also to say that while non-Jews were seriously morally implicated before the holocaust, Jews were morally implicated afterwards and through it.

<sup>15</sup> The incident that forced her to leave is presented in Pakonsky and Michlis, *The Neighbours Respond*, p.451.

<sup>16</sup> István Bibó allows for the possibility of this (what can be called the "immoral expression of moral outrage") after greater persecution of Jews, but denies the possibility that the persecutors of Jews had moral considerations. István Bibó, "Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után," in Sándor Szilágyi, *Bibó Írásai* (Budapest: Uj Mandátum, 2001), p.229.

<sup>17</sup> Gross, *Szomszédok*, p.118-9.

that is justified towards Gross' work, namely that he could have done more in presenting the complexities of the Polish story.<sup>18</sup> In general, Gross' explanations for human actions at times feel simplistic.

It might sound slightly exaggerated, but it is not fruitless to consider studies related to the holocaust as a separate discipline, that have their own established framework, within the structures of traditional academia, in the sphere of visual arts (in movies or commemorative art), etc. Holocaust studies have acquired their own logic and internal dynamic, and tackle a wide variety of issues that are linked in specific ways. Passionate debates about issues related to the holocaust are recurrent and these debates can be considered multidisciplinary as well as undisciplined. Multidisciplinary since they tend to have philosophical, moral, political, sociological and historical contents and implications, to mention only few of the most important ones.<sup>19</sup>

The debates are undisciplined not only because they are multidisciplinary, but also since they take place on various societal levels, and these levels tend to get mixed. It is often controversial books that renew interest. They might simultaneously excite and perplex a large readership, while disappoint (or even outrage) professionals. Jonah Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* is a particularly good example of this. This enormously successful book, that was particularly appreciated by a large number of Germans, was not only preceded by Christopher Browning's more sophisticated study, titled *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, presenting similar findings in a much more thoughtful, acceptable way, it was also harshly criticized by scholars dealing with the holocaust. Even so, it forced professionals to make further clarifications, so also on the scholarly level its publication was not futile (or even counterproductive), as some suggested, perceiving in it unmistakable anti-German biases reminiscent of the early post-war publications.

<sup>18</sup> Characteristic in this sense is that on the pages of *Neighbors* Gross criticizes the Polish perception of having been innocent victims, but does not admit that this is not only a general perception (artificially created through selective remembrance of historical events), but there is also a profound cause of this that many Poles share. The story about innocent victimhood is for many Poles not only a story about their nation independent of their personal stories, but is directly connected to it, it is line with it.

<sup>19</sup> Moreover, arguably the great human traumas, like the holocaust, cannot be thought and represented by human reasons, solely by aesthetic imagination. In line with this, interest is frequently expressed in the memory and representation (in the culture that emerged in response to the holocaust), not so much in the historical event as such.

Knowing the central (and in certain ways exceptional) place the holocaust has in contemporary cultural memory and life, the widespread discussions and passionate debates that emerged in the wake of the publication of *Neighbors* should perhaps not even be expected to have been caused by the quality of Gross' work. In fact, the study's deficiencies, such as the briefness and sketchiness of its discussions of complicated and crucial questions, the confusing nature of some of its central arguments and the aforementioned strange changes in its tone (from ambiguous to assertive) could be positive values in triggering public debates. Its claims on various levels could lead to a multifaceted public debate, to simultaneous political acts, moral inquiries and historical discussions.

Important to remember is that Poland was not included in the intellectual space where several rounds of holocaust debates took place already. Its incorporation into this international, Western space is far from complete, and poses some unique difficulties. From the debate this was evident in numerous ways. It is one of the issues that throughout the post-war period there was a nearly independent Jewish and Polish construction of the horrors of the war and the two stories (which are in no sense monolithic, of course) cannot be expected to be reconciled overnight,<sup>20</sup> even if steps in this direction are long overdue. For matters to advance, the realization is needed that the recognition of another group's martyrdom does not have to mean less recognition for one's own group. This "market" should not be understood as competitive, so that it does not (inappropriately) turn into one. Even if honest commemorations can never be separated from the politics of the past (where present stakes are high), at least it needs to be assured that recognition of the past's horrors is not replaced by inappropriate infighting.

There is a near-unanimous international recognition of the primacy of Jewish victimhood. Poland's position is rather exceptional on this point where there is rather solid international consensus. Illustrative of the peculiarity of the Polish perspective is that from the Polish point of view (meaning the "free" Polish point of view) the Soviet role in the Second World War was different from the West. Silencing reflection on the 1939-41 period might have been possible in post-war, communist-ruled Poland, though the willing acceptance of the bracketing of this period, which was crucial to the anti-fascist narrative, was out of the question for Polish patriots. Not only the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the Soviet-Nazi

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the wish to completely reconcile the two stories is utopian.

cooperation in the division of Poland in 1939, but also the Soviet role in the Katyn massacre and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 are ample proofs for this. On the other hand, the danger that the discrediting of the anti-fascist myth of the war would lead to the positive reassessment of the role of Nazi Germany (obviously present in other countries of the region) is much smaller in Poland. That there was substantial and expressed Polish opposition and resistance to both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union (and their drastic anti-Polish measures) turned into Poland's unique advantage over other countries since Poles do not face the "pro-Communist or pro-Nazi" dilemma to the same extent. Simultaneously, it is this double victimization of Poles that makes it more difficult for them to accept their share of responsibility towards the contemporary fate of Jews.

My argument is that in order to overcome this peculiar situation, to move beyond this impasse, where the Polish story can be unflaggingly anti-totalitarian, but not sufficiently sensitive to the Judeocide (Arno Mayer), a certain de-ethnicization of the controversial issues is required. The uncovering of the Jedwabne massacre, seemingly inevitably, touched on the self-image of Poles, which features as one of its crucial components the self-understanding as a righteous and often heroic nation that was several times victimized by others. Miklós Szabó's point is well taken about the nation being "a great community with the structure of a small one" that "offers collective experiences," and about nationalism "not being the ideology of parts," and thus not being a political ideology in the sense liberalism, socialism, or conservatism. It can be fruitfully applied to the *Neighbours* debate.<sup>21</sup> It was this ("communal") conception of the nation that the participants tended to use, unquestioningly.

There are certainly great differences, sharp contrasts between the amount of crimes committed by various nations during the period in question, which ought not to be forgotten. At the same time, the almost exclusively ethnicized conception of crimes, which many of the participants in the Jedwabne debate shared, is misconceived. Without propagating a de-ethnicization of victimization and victimhood, my claim is that the fact that the Jedwabne perpetrators were (somehow) Polish helps us very little in explaining the crime (and I shall elaborate why I think so), and in fact something more was at stake with the Jedwabne case, namely human self-understanding. Essential and unsettling moral and psychological questions are at hand,

<sup>21</sup> These ideas are presented in his essay collection, Miklós Szabó, *Művészi önéletrajz* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 1995).



difficult enough to face, and which their ethnicization blurs rather than helps clarifying.

Péter Balassa, when asked about the ways of societal self-regulation, stated that “Deciding is a human privilege since humans live not in an environment but in a world, and this always implies alternatives [...] Ethics is always about freedom, since it assumes the possibility to decide. [...] But once you made a decision you are no longer free. Decisions have consequences. It is the freedom to decide that is absolute, not freedom as such. [...] This is one of the liberal conceptions. The other is Kant’s, who stated that humans are chosen beings since they have moral consciences, and in theory even in the worst perpetrator there is the awareness of his/her guilt. Consequently not only legal sanctions assure that the guilty ones will confront their guilt and the consequences of their actions, but their inner moral selves. [...] Humans] can internalize bans even without external compulsion. It was modernity’s great discovery that men are [...] dual beings – they are aggressive predators, who can exactly know what is right and what is wrong – and that this duality cannot be abolished, only regulated.”<sup>22</sup>

Irene Kertész takes on the issue of our conception of men, which Balassa so aptly describes, and relates it directly to the holocaust, when arguing that “the experiences collectively referred to as the holocaust reveal that humans are not what the enlightenment, what humanism [...] or modern industrialism imagined [...] the lesson is the knowledge that humans are capable of anything.”<sup>23</sup> His claim is that perhaps the world as such did not end with the holocaust, but it meant the end of a certain view of culture.

In the Jedwabne case, crucial questions relate to the characteristics and identity of the perpetrators. Gross’ crucial reassessment of the traditional Polish view was that one cannot regard these Polish mass murderers as marginal elements, and pretend that “ordinary Poles” remained uninvolved. He shows that perpetrators of the Jedwabne atrocities were individuals who were perhaps not representatives of their society, but were not living on its fringes either. Frightening as this sounds, the ones responsible for these heinous crimes have to be regarded as “ordinary” according to this view. Without denying that the assessment of these criminals as ordinary is more appropriate than notions about their marginality, should it then be regarded as completely random whether people massacre each other today or not, and are such

<sup>22</sup> Balassa says this in an interview titled “Jelenlét kell talajborításon saját kizárásomért” in Péter Balassa, *Független*, pp.248-9

<sup>23</sup> Kertész in “Hollywoodi humanizmus” in Balassa, *Független*, pp.267-8.

occurrences doomed to remain basically inexplicable? Moral arguments about humans (whether of the Kantian type or of less universalistic conception) fail us. Arguments about political environments and external pressures are indispensable, but they cannot fully account for the phenomenon at hand either. This necessitates an internal, psychological approach.

Distinguishing between what might be called internal and external totalitarianism, János Pelle's delimitation of cognitive and real totalitarianism is useful.<sup>24</sup> His claim is that cognitive totalitarianism became part of people's mental structure, was basically dynamic and destructive, while real (or structural) totalitarianism (which he claims was in place in the Soviet Union under Stalin), though it could also dispose of fanatical cadres, was not quite as effective from the point of view of mass psychology, and thus it lacked the dynamism of cognitive totalitarianism.<sup>25</sup> Cognitive totalitarianism could become people's "second nature," and their amoral and instinctively destructive conception of the world (connected to such people's politically manipulated world of instincts) could guide them (when "liberated" from the control of their superiors) the way it did during the Second World War.<sup>26</sup> This concept of totalitarian psychological deformation helps us more in approximating how the massacre of the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1941 could take place than the "ordinary Polish" identity of the perpetrators.

As mentioned earlier, a disappointing characteristic of Gross' book and the ensuing debate is that the problematic around the identity of the perpetrators was thoroughly ethnicized without much further reflection on what their ethnicity actually meant. Such obvious questions as what it meant for these people to be Polish were left unaddressed. Was it their primary identity, were they "Polish" as opposed to the(ir) "Jewish" victims, as many of the writers seemed to imply by using these two labels? Did not they perhaps view themselves as Christians in relation (and as opposed) to the Jews? Is the territory of inter-war Poland the one to be looked at if we wished to understand the events of 1941, were these people simply Poles because of their recent (and recently lost) Polish citizenship? It appears that the people living in the territories first conquered by the Soviet Union and then invaded by Nazi Germany experienced a different history from people living in former parts of Poland not invaded by the Soviet Union (before 1941, and not until the last phase of the war). The similarities between the types of behaviors (specifically towards Jews) of Poles, Ukrainians, Belorussians, etc., in

<sup>24</sup> Structural might be a more appropriate word than real.

<sup>25</sup> János Pelle, "A totalitarizmus öröksége," in Pelle, *Antiszocializmus*, p.91.

<sup>26</sup> János Pelle, "Antiszocializmus és totalitárius," in Pelle, *Antiszocializmus*, p.133.

these territories were conspicuous. Naturally, the differences in behavior within these ethnic groups were greater than between them. Therefore, it is analytically not as justified to speak of the Poles', Ukrainians' (etc.) behavior during the war (as a group of people supposedly unified in any substantial way) as it is to speak of perpetrators' behavior, bystanders' behavior, rescuers' behaviors (etc.). They were all present in different ethnic groups, even if to significantly different degrees.

Besides the undiscussed problem of what notions of Polishness as reality (as mother tongue, as a Polish place of residence, etc.) and as ideology (as a concept to interpret one's world and as an idea to conceive of oneself) mattered in the Jedwabne massacre, some other terminological issues were not satisfyingly solved in the course of the debate. The problem of the relation of Nazis to Germans is well known. Gross uses "Germans" throughout his book, or refers to institutions such as the Wehrmacht, but not to people as Nazis. Similar complications are caused by using labels for people such as communists and Poles, as if they were somehow on the same level, as if Poles could not be communists, and as if communists had no nationality (of relevance).<sup>27</sup> References to people as Polish, German or communist are taken from greater narratives of history, and their usefulness in explaining single events that were part of the holocaust is limited. In conclusion, when writing on the microscale different modes of explanation are required. The exploration of political environments and external pressures cannot be neglected, and psychological inquiries are also needed.

Though assessments of this varied greatly,<sup>28</sup> there was a wide consensus in the course of the *Neighbors* debate that Poland is in need of soul-searching. This might very well be the case, and the flood of responses is indicative of it. In my view, this need is easier to account for through looking at the situation in contemporary Poland than by "what really happened in the Second World War." Gross' book provoked such responses because it called for a more critical reassessment of Polish history, and presented a moral and psychological puzzle difficult to face and account for, that intrigued many people. While such a reassessment would be agreeable and the puzzles related to the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1941 in Jedwabne require consideration, in my opinion these two issues ought to be separated. Looking at the Jedwabne

<sup>27</sup> Perplexingly, Gross has two subsequent chapters titled "The Soviet invasion, 1939-1941" and "The outbreak of the Russian-German war and the pogrom of Radzilow".

<sup>28</sup> Every shade from claims that honest confrontation with the past was taking place in Poland to claims to the effect the Poles are (still) in the state of denial and unready/unwilling to confront the issue of Polish-Jewish relations was represented.

massacre through the prisms of Polish history and looking at Polish history through the prisms of the Jedwabne massacre can be fruitful in a number of ways, but these are not the most justified approaches to these two problem areas.

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