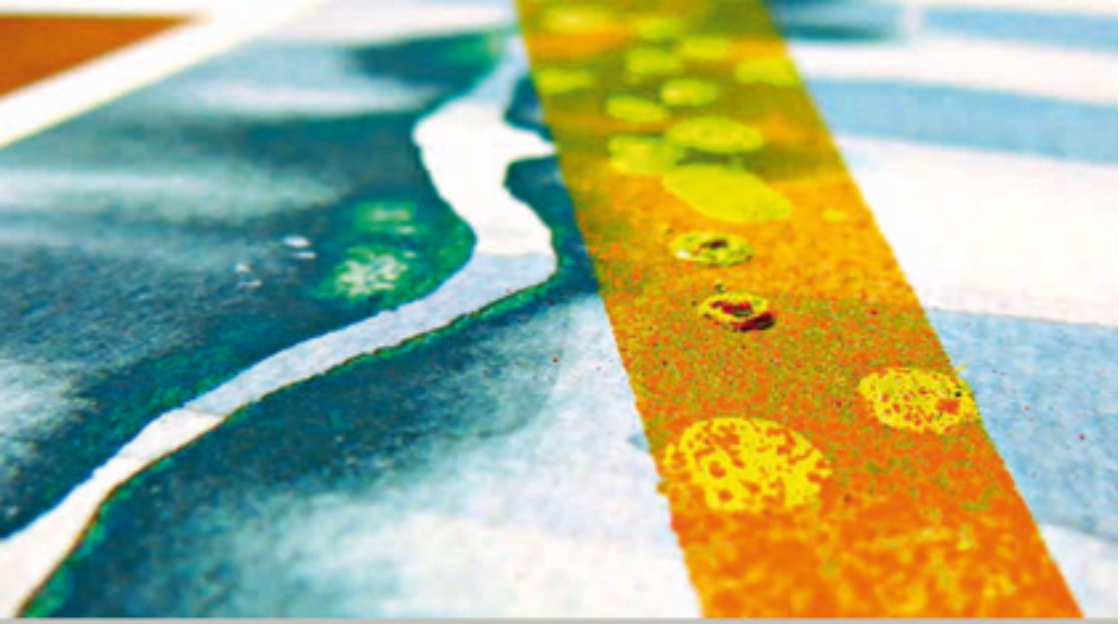

Jan Tomasz Gross

Collected Essays on War, Holocaust and the Crisis of Communism

6

EASTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE, POLITICS AND SOCIETIES

PETER LANG EDITION

1. 'Making History': My Intellectual Journey into the Hidden Polish Past?[1]

Even though autobiography is a well-established genre I find speaking about my own intellectual path somewhat awkward. I rather think that one should do one's work and let it speak for itself. But I have been told that Copernicus lectures have had this semi-confessional character in the past, and so, with your indulgence I will draw a very subjective sketch of why I have chosen to study Polish history the way I do.

From the time I entered Warsaw University as a freshmen my academic trajectory was rather unusual. Ever since I remember thinking about it in school, I knew that at the university I would study… physics. Mathematics came easily to me (but as I was soon painfully to discover – not beyond the high-school level), and I chose physics as a field of study because, I thought it was also about the world. Somewhere in my mind the idea lingered that physics would serve as a good bridge to philosophy. A sympathetic commentator can appreciate in this jumbled reasoning an embedded, Comte'an, understanding of the hierarchy of human sciences. But it bespoke most of all confusion, showing that I didn't know what to do. The important thing was that it made my parents happy.

Under "real socialism," a child who chose a career relatively immune from political supervision by the state was a real gift to his or her parents. Especially that my family tradition, on both sides, was to pursue law – a really politically tainted field in the People's Republic of Poland.

Even though I never entertained the thought of law studies (though after two years I switched from physics to sociology) I still managed to have an early brush with the law, which was also in tune with family traditions. My maternal grandfather was kicked out of the university for his patriotic activities before the First World War. He got, as it was then called, a *wilczy bilet* – a "wolf's ticket" – from the tzarist authorities, and had to finish his law studies in Odessa, since he was banned from enrolling at any institution of higher learning in the Kingdom of Poland.

---

1 2013 Copernicus Lecture delivered at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, on November 11, 2013.

I got in trouble with the police while still in high school. It was not, however, what you may think. It was Adam Michnik. Already as a child, Adam had a bad influence on his friends. An avid reader since early youth, especially curious about Polish history and Communism, he stole books from his friends' parents' libraries. And so I, of course, became an accomplice. However, it was not theft that the security police hauled us to interrogation for.

We were the original baby-boomers, the post-war generation born between 1945 and 1947. In Eastern Europe, significantly, this made of us the first XXth century cohort that did not directly experience the full force of totalitarianism. Nazi occupation of the region was over before we were born. Many of us who had Jewish blood, had been born only because the Nazis had been defeated before they managed to kill our would-be parents. And given that Communist regimes mellowed within two or three years after Stalin's death in March of 1953, Stalinist brutalities didn't directly affect us either, because we were too small. When Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes and the cult of personality in his famous secret speech at the XXth Congress of CPSU, we were still in elementary school.

My friends, for the most part, came from a leftist secular milieu with a tradition of political engagement. Our parents before the war were either Communist or Socialist party members or sympathizers, and to their quasi-universal chagrin we, their children, also fell for the ethos of speaking and acting on behalf of worthy causes. Our sense of security springing from the lucky coincidence of being born after the war, and a belief that the ideals and the practice of socialism could be harmonized into "a socialism with human face" (to use a well-turned phrase popularized later during the Czechoslovak "Prague Spring") gave us the impetus to establish while still in high school… a discussion club.

I know this sounds silly, but activity in defense of freedom of speech under authoritarian regimes that deny it to their citizens, consists, primarily, of acts of speech. In time we made ourselves enough of a nuisance for the regime, which was engaged in suppressing demands for liberalization originating simultaneously in various milieus of Polish intelligentsia and the Catholic church, to clamp down on our milieu as well.

High school and early university years had a formative influence on my life. I met people then who remain my lifelong friends and interlocutors. We were curious about the world, and given the state of media technology at the time this meant reading and talking a lot. Given the politics of the region in which we lived, this eventually got us into serious trouble. Scores of us would end up imprisoned for longer or shorter periods. Adam Michnik clocked over six years

in jail before the 1989 revolution put an end to Communism in Eastern Europe. Many people, including myself, were pushed into exile. Altogether these experiences formed a bond that has lasted a lifetime.

For me and the group of friends who started discussing politics and history in the early nineteen sixties, the real moment of truth came in 1968, during the so-called "March Events." In the aftermath of the June 1967 "six-days war" in the Middle East, where client states of the Soviet Union – Egypt and Syria – suffered a humiliating defeat, the Soviet bloc countries broke diplomatic relations with Israel and deployed anti-Zionist propaganda. In Poland the secret police funneled inflated stories and accounts to the first secretary of the PUWP about Jews, including party members, who were celebrating the Israeli victory. Wladyslaw Gomulka, who was well known for his temper tantrums, got incensed, and at the first opportunity, during a national congress of labor unions, delivered an incendiary speech denouncing a Zionist "fifth column," inviting those who, as he put it, felt that Israel rather than Poland was their mother-country, to leave Poland altogether.

A few months later, on the wave of cresting official anti-Semitism, a secret police dominated faction in the Communist establishment decided to make its bid for top party leadership. They failed, but not before unleashing an official anti-Semitic campaign in Poland (cloaked in anti-Zionist garb), which led to a brutal pacification of the nascent student movement and creative intelligentsia which had been calling for greater cultural freedom and liberalization.

After a brief imprisonment, I was kicked out of the university – to male students this meant a revocation of draft exemption and the prospect of a two-year military service – and together with my parents decided to take the option made available by the regime in a fit of pique. While waiting for an immigrant visa to the United States I got lucky, and obtained a graduate fellowship to continue studying sociology at Yale University.

I've given this trove of personal details here because my engagement with the history of the German occupation of Poland during the Second World War came about, in a manner of speaking, for autobiographical reasons. To move from Warsaw, dreary and steeped in official anti-Semitic propaganda, into the intellectual comfort of Yale University's ivory towers was quite a culture shock. It further accentuated the contrast between our student movement's joyous engagement with liberty and freedom of speech, and the dull, repressive, quality of "real socialism." The secret police may have pulverized the student and intellectual milieus during the "March Events" and their aftermath (sending people to jail and into exile in the process), but what the regime got for their trouble

bode ill for it's future – a wave of mediocrities moving into faculty positions at universities; cynical careerists pushing for accelerated job advancement in the administration, and hack journalists dressing their anti-Semitism in anti-Zionist rhetoric becoming the darlings of party propaganda (in scholarly literature about "real socialism" such a phenomenon is sometimes called "a mechanism of negative selection").

Barely 5 months later, in August of 1968, a much more robust popular demand for political liberty – the Prague Spring – was cut short in Czechoslovakia, this time by a combined military effort of Warsaw Pact countries. Afterwards, it felt in one's bones that the Soviet bloc regimes were non-reformable, and unable to accommodate people's natural desire to live in freedom. So while we may have lost a battle in March of 1968, I thought that in the proverbial "long run" Polish society would cast off its Communist party rulers. Before too long, in fact.

Hence the autobiographical context for my curiosity about what makes society resist repressive institutions and safeguard its freedom. In some small measure, we had done such a thing as students in Warsaw. And it occurred to me that the history of Polish resistance against the German occupation during the Second World War would provide a very instructive case for how this had been done on a grand scale, so to speak.

This is what led me to chose as dissertation topic "Polish Society under German Occupation; The Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944." I cannot resist quoting what I wrote, I am sorry to say, nearly forty years ago in the concluding paragraphs of this study which came out as a book, now long forgotten, in 1979 – that is an entire year before the onset of Solidarity movement, and a whole ten years before the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire.

"What we observe in the Generalgouvernement during the Second World War is an early case, as I would like to call it, of a democratic revolution. By this name, I refer to a recent process of political transformation that with increasing frequency captures our attention: the restitution of pluralistic democratic politics in countries subject to authoritarian rule. […]

Authoritarian governments, particularly those that were introduced by totalitarian revolution, find themselves in a serious predicament. For they are, figuratively speaking, cut off from their own societies. Insulated by powerful bureaucracies that are interested primarily in self-perpetuation, they know less and less about the true nature of the interests, aspirations, fears, and preferences of the existing and newly forming social forces in the complex modern societies over which they rule. By imposing an ostensible uniformity and obedience

they do not prevent social initiatives from developing and various group interests from being pursued. Rather, by denying legitimacy to this authentic social plurality they induce interest groups to manipulate the system […] and force them to circumvent the existing institutions, to articulate outside of the officially sanctioned establishment. Consequently, with the passage of time, the authorities have a completely distorted representation of reality, and […] they cannot do anything about it because accurate information regarding important resources in such a society is simply not available.

One could perhaps argue that this matters little; after all, despotic governments are by definition not supposed to be troubled by their inability to read and therefore satisfy the preference of their subjects. But in truth, a government needs information about public preferences and resources, not only to cater to public tastes, but also in order to manipulate the public. And this is the reason why the social vacuum in which an authoritarian government finds itself is so incapacitating: such a government cannot even plan to reform itself because it is incapable of predicting the consequences of any reforms. It is paralyzed by having lost the capacity to foresee the consequences of its actions; it can only respond to breakdowns because it has lost the ability to anticipate.

I believe that we shall continue to see many authoritarian regimes succumb to democratic revolutions whereby societies […] will once more reassert themselves against governments. I have attempted here to analyze an early episode of this most important and still emerging social process."[2]

Before I chose my dissertation topic I seized on the opportunity provided by my meeting at Yale a remarkable scholar, Juan Linz, who eventually became my dissertation advisor. Linz's *Doktorvater* was Seymour Martin Lipset and Linz's dissertation – though never published – was famous (or rather, I should say, infamous) for being well over one thousand pages long. He wrote about the social determinants of Hitler's ascent to power in Germany. In time Linz would become recognized as a path-breaking thinker about totalitarian and authoritarian regimes and also about – what would become known and fashionable in the late 1970s and 1980s as – "regime transitions."

When I met Linz at Yale he was studying how democracies break down. Later, as in his native Spain the pace of political change picked up with declining health of General Franco, he would study the reverse process: instauration and re-equilibration of democratic regimes. So when the 1989 "refolution" unfolded

2 Jan T. Gross, *Polish Society Under German Occupation. Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979, p. 305–306.

in Eastern Europe, bringing about the collapse of Communist rule, and as the field of sovietology was barren, devoid of ideas, and clueless about such a turn of the historical tide, Linz's writings would be read carefully in the region for enlightenment and inspiration by social scientists turned politicians.

When I was finishing my degree, there was still considerable overlap between social sciences and history, and reasonably generous funding for area studies. Admittedly this was not the most common practice, but I moved between disciplines without too many eyebrows raised. After teaching in a department of sociology at Yale and at Emory University, and then in the department of politics at NYU, I was finally hired by the history department at Princeton. And yet, intellectually, I didn't move – I have always done research and writing in the same manner. What happened was that the disciplinary boundaries were shifting. I felt that my career paralleled the experiences of those XXth century residents of trans-Carpathian Ruthenia, who while always remaining in one place, over the course of a lifetime nevertheless managed to acquire the citizenship of four or five different states.

But witticisms aside, my apprenticeship in sociology taught me a fundamental premise: that social phenomena, or, if you will, facts on the ground, do not occur in isolation. This may not seem like "rocket science," but when inculcated early into a student's imagination it frames the manner in which one inquires about the world. One learns that any assertion of a social fact implicitly commits to a broader narrative, because it automatically limits the range of other simultaneous or future phenomena that could have plausibly taken place. Given common sense and the general knowledge of human nature, if "X" has occurred, than in all likelihood neither "Y," nor "Z," nor "W," which are incompatible with "X," could have taken place as well. And while we may be interested in "X," it happens occasionally that "X" is inaccessible for direct measurement, but we can gather empirical evidence about "Y," "Z," or "W," and in such indirect manner verify or invalidate claims concerning the occurrence of "X." I will later give an example from my own thinking along these lines about the conundrum of Polish-Jewish relations during the war.

For now let me add also what, in hindsight, I realized was the significance of my short brush with physics for the way I approach the study of history. I think instinctively about historical material in terms of problems that need to be solved. This is what students of physics have to do for their weekly assignments – solve a bunch of problems for the next class.

Such a frame of mind for a historian is very much a mixed blessing. After all, what we strive towards and value most in our discipline is writing a story, culminating in an overview of a historical period –Tony Judt's *Postwar* comes to

mind as a good example – or a synthesis of a historical phenomenon – such as Saul Friedlander's diptych *Nazi Germany and the Jews* followed by *The Years of Extermination*. I wouldn't be able to do anything of the sort. I can only do narrowly focused history, trying to make sense of a particular aspect of the flow of events – a serious limitation of scholarly abilities, but at least I am aware of it.

Before I got to the last few paragraphs in my dissertation, which I read from earlier, I wrote some 250 pages about Polish society under German occupation. Nothing that I have written there makes me blush on re-reading today. But while it is not what I wrote that is embarrassing, I nevertheless blush because of what I have left out. There is nothing – or, to be exact, altogether a page and a half – in the book… about the Jews. And I wasn't even aware of missing anything because the historiographical standard at the time – whether one wrote about Polish, or French, or Dutch, or any other European society under occupation – was to leave everything concerning the Jews aside. This was a different subject, as it were, a different field of specialization, and a different set of scholars were writing about it. None of my advisors – all distinguished Europeanists with an eminent historian of modern Poland among them – raised any questions about this omission.

When I think back now, about the writing of this book, I realize that I didn't have to do much editing of the sources in order to construct the narrative in this manner. There were two major archival collections in London, the General Sikorski Institute and the Underground Poland Study Trust, where I went to do research. I spent many months buried in documents produced by the underground Polish state –– and only rarely, usually as an appendix, found more than a brief mention of the Jews. The Underground State in Poland, *Panstwo Podziemne*, was, for all practical purposes, an entity defined by ethnicity rather than citizenship. Legally and institutionally, with the government in exile situated in London, it was, as much as it could be, a continuation of the Polish state. But its practice in the home country, its allocation of resources, the numerous organizations that it spawned, as well as its rhetoric (there was a huge variety of underground publications) left out one third of Poland's pre-war citizens, the so-called ethnic minorities.

After my dissertation was published I embarked upon another project stimulated by a find at the Hoover Institution, where I stumbled upon reams of files in unopened carton boxes. I found there thousands of interviews conducted by the Historical Bureau of the Polish Army in the East (known as the "Anders army" – from the name of its commanding general, Wladyslaw Anders.) This army was recruited from Polish citizens released from custody in Soviet camps or forced settlement, after the USSR was attacked by Nazi Germany and joined the Allies in their fight against Hitler. As part of the process the Soviets also renewed

diplomatic relationships with the Polish government in exile residing in London at the time, set free Polish citizens, including the army veterans they had previously deported or arrested, and allowed, indeed encouraged, the creation of a Polish army in the USSR. In 1942 they allowed the 110,000 people thus assembled – Polish military personnel and their families – to leave the Soviet Union for the neighboring Iran, where Polish units could be easily supplied and outfitted by the British.

This was the population from which the Polish authorities harvested information about conditions of life under the Soviet rule by distributing questionnaires on a number of issues. I culled from these testimonies rich material and even though there were gaps I was able to write a comprehensive monograph entitled *Revolution from Abroad; Soviet Rule in Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia, 1939–1941,* which came out in 1988.

Ostensibly this was a step sideways from my earlier focus on the German occupation of Poland, taking me even further away from what I left out in the first monograph– namely, that which had happened to Jews – which was starting to preoccupy me more and more. It turned out, however, that I could not have planned more prudently the sequence of my investigations into Poland's wartime history. When my book *Neighbors* came out, the main line of push back from patriotic historians, journalists, and assorted experts, was to argue that I was presenting the story "out of context," because the town of Jedwabne was in the Soviet zone of occupation until June 1941, and Jews were guilty of collaboration with the Soviets.

If I hadn't written *Revolution from Abroad*, and also published with my wife two volumes of documents about the period, I would have been stumped. Instead, unlike my opponents, who were repeating clichés about Jews and communism – which, to boot were historically incorrect – I knew the sources and the relevant literature, which I had studied for years while preparing the three books I wrote about the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

All along, while researching and writing about Soviet rule between 1939 and 1941, I was reading about Jewish experiences under German occupation. It was becoming clear to me that the Polish-Jewish relations during the war were much more fraught, much worse, than Polish scholarship was willing to admit. The turning point for me was the collection of documents *Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej…*("He is from my mother-country") put out by professor Wladyslaw Bartoszewski. He was (and, thank God, at the time of this writing still is!) a man of impeccable intellectual integrity, himself courageously engaged during the war in the activities of the well-known Committee to Help the Jews, Zegota. In 1969,

together with his co-author Zofia Lewinowna, he published a volume of Jewish testimonies collected immediately after the war from survivors. All these testimonies are stored in a large archival collection, no. 301, at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, today accessible on line.

The aim of the publication was to document how Poles extended assistance to Jews during the war. And indeed all the testimonies that one could read in the volume had a happy ending – they came, after all, from survivors. But what happened to these Jews before they finally stumbled upon someone who helped them hide out till the end of the war, was horrifying – a long series of betrayals, often by people they knew from before the war. If this was the best proof that could be mustered in defense of Polish good will and assistance, I trembled at the thought what thousands of remaining testimonies in the archives would reveal. And when I could finally travel back to Poland after 1989, and went to the Institute to read its archival collections my premonitions were confirmed. I found there, among others, the testimony of Szmul Wasersztajn about Jedwabne.

So what was the view on Polish-Jewish relations during the war that I found wanting? In Polish historiography and general collective wisdom (i.e. in laymen's views or journalistic accounts), a consensus prevailed that the comportment of the Polish population towards the Jews during the war was explainable by the extraordinary brutality of German repressions. Nowhere else, only in Poland – the argument stipulated – was helping the Jews punishable by death and, what is more, for the entire family of the person daring to violate the prohibition. Hence, this help was the most dangerous form of anti-Nazi activity.

No wonder then, the explanation goes, that Poles behaved towards the Jews the way they did. There was a tiny minority who took risks and helped the Jews, irrespective of consequences, and indeed some were killed for their heroism. Those Poles who declined to offer assistance, however, cannot be blamed, because one cannot impose on people, as a presumed standard, that they behave like heroes. As to a tiny minority that blackmailed Jews who were trying to hide, and betrayed them to the Germans, well, there is always scum in society, and, besides, they were marked as outcasts by the underground state and the rest of society, which called them with the derogatory term *szmalcowniks*.

This was a very handy explanation, which rendered all things transparent. It also conveniently implied that the interface of relationships between Poles and Jews during the German occupation was narrow. The vast majority of the population, the "normal" Poles, allegedly lived their own separate existence and only a numerically small group of outliers (villains and heroes) had anything to do with the Jews.

We know today that this is all wrong, that explaining Polish behavior by invoking fear of German repressions does not hold water, and that the factual premises on which this argument is based are false or misleading.

The interface of relationships between Poles and Jews was extensive, involving broad segments of the population. Hundreds of thousands of Jews had been killed in Poland during the Holocaust *in situ*, in their places of residence, in full view of the local population, and millions of local residents benefited materially from their destruction. Collective responsibility was used by the Germans to enforce obedience with respect to all kinds of regulations, and many more people were killed in reprisal for underground activity, for example, than for helping out the Jews. Assisting and sheltering the Jews was an especially dangerous activity in occupied Poland not because those caught in the act were uniformly killed (because they weren't), but because they were uniformly spied upon by their neighbors and denounced to the so-called Dark-blue Police (*policja granatowa*), an auxiliary formation staffed by Poles in German employ, who would usually beat and rob the helpers and then let them go, while killing the apprehended Jews.

But this is the knowledge that we have today. We also know that the real issue concerning Jews and Poles during the war was not refusal to help on the part of the Poles, but widespread acquiescence of the Polish population and occasional complicity in persecution of the Jews. We know now where to look for empirical evidence that expands our understanding about the sections of Polish society involved in those misdeeds. Monographs about such phenomena are being written, as we speak.

But twenty-five years ago we were still in the dark about these things. When in 1987 an eminent literary critic, Jan Blonski, published in Poland's equivalent of the NYRB – in the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* – an article entitled "Poor Poles look at the ghetto" (taking off a poem by Czeslaw Milosz), in which he argued that it should have some significance for the Poles that the soil of their country has been soaked in Jewish blood and that, consequently, Poles ought to take some ownership of the Jewish catastrophe (mourn the victims, for example)– even though, and Blonski said so explicitly, God had stayed the Poles' hand and they had not directly partaken in the murder of the Jews – the venerable weekly was inundated by protest letters from its readership, which comprised at the time the most sophisticated and open minded segments of Polish intelligentsia.

The editor of *Tygodnik*, Jerzy Turowicz, was so taken aback by the vehemence of the public's response that he felt obliged to publish a few contributions reflecting this mood – notable among them a piece by Wladyslaw Sila-Nowicki,

a prominent defense attorney and former political prisoner who had spent time in Stalinist jails. The gist of the angry responses to Blonski's article was that the Poles owed the Jews nothing for their behavior during the Holocaust, that people did as much as they could to help, and that they should deservedly take pride in it.[3]

Blonski's article is now viewed as the beginning of Polish reexamination of the society's self-satisfied perception of its own comportment towards the Jews during the war. But in fact a year earlier an émigré quarterly *Aneks* devoted an entire issue to the examination of Polish-Jewish relations during the war, which included articles pushing the matter beyond Blonski's framing of the issue. I had a piece there too, entitled "He is from my mother-country…, only I do not like him." It was an ironic transposition of Wladyslaw Bartoszewski's book title, and I made an argument in the article guided by the sociological principle that social phenomena do not occur in isolation.

I never liked the standard explanation about what happened between Poles and Jews during the war. The argument along the lines "we were afraid to help the Jews because of the ferocity of German repressions" seemed unpersuasive from the start given the widespread, and one could even say reckless, engagement of Poles in clandestine activity aimed against the Nazi occupation. The Polish anti-Nazi underground state – in fact a broadly based social movement comprising an entire spectrum of groups from school-age children to military veterans – was the most robust undertaking of it's kind in all of occupied Europe. In this context alone the argument "Poles did not do something or other because they were afraid" did not hold water very well.

But there was more that did not fit with this purported explanation. For example, how could one incorporate into it yet another well-known phenomenon – a universal hostility towards the Jews in post-war Poland? Should there not have been, instead, a period of mourning and soul-searching among Poles after the war over the monstrous calamity that the Jews had suffered unaided by their fearful fellow Polish citizens? And shouldn't those who were prevented by their own fear from helping human beings exposed to mortal danger have been greeting the very few returning now against all the odds to their homes, and lavishing them with affection over their miraculous survival, while sharing in their grief over the loss of their families and kin? In reality lone survivors returning to their

3 Blonski's article together with a few others published in the ensuing discussion appeared in English in *"My Brotehr's Keeper": recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust,* Antony Polonsky, ed., Routledge, London and New York, 1990.

towns and villages were routinely greeted with an off-putting – "so, you are still alive?" – and, if lucky, were discretely advised to go away, or else they were told, they risked being killed. While before the war over two million Jews lived in shtetls in Poland, after the war Jewish survivors could reside in relative safety only in a few of the largest cities.

Why were the Poles who despite all odds had hidden and assisted some Jews during the war, afraid afterwards to disclose their noble deeds lest their neighbors ostracize them, or worse, for what they had done? Shouldn't they, instead, have been celebrated in their communities as heroes? Why was it standard practice, after the occupation was already over, for those who hid the Jews to beg their wards as they were coming out of hiding not to reveal to anyone the identity of their helpers?

After my essay on Polish-Jewish relations during the war appeared in 1986, I continued reading on the subject and published a short book in Poland ten years later, in 1998, entitled *A Horrible Decade* (*Upiorna Dekada*). But the events in Jedwabne went beyond what I imagined to have been possible. Even though I had a very good knowledge of the wartime period by 1999, when I finally came to grips with the story of the Jedwabne murders, I was stunned by the realization that the killing had been indeed carried out pretty much as described by Szmul Wasersztajn. And this was not because of my naivete, I hasten to add. Before an acrimonious debate about *Neighbors* began, I heard from a senior Polish historian specializing in World War II (who later became one of my vociferous opponents), as well as from Israel Guttman, the chief historian at Yad Vashem at the time – that they too were both shocked by the account of the Jedwabne murder, as it did not conform with what each of them independently knew about the epoch.

There was a "surplus" in the Jedwabne story, if you will, of many kinds. To begin with, for an indigenous killing episode perpetrated by the locals, the number of victims as well as the number of perpetrators were stunning. The manner in which the murders were carried out – specifically the deliberate effort to round up ALL the Jews who had lived in town, including women, children, and the elderly – was something new as well, since in July of 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen*, Nazi killing squads on the Eastern Front, were still targeting only – or in any case, primarily – grown-up Jewish males. The exclusively Polish ethnic composition of the perpetrators was also a revelation. Historians knew about mass killings in which the local population had participated but not in central Poland, only in multi-ethnic areas, further east and north, where Ukrainians and Lithuanians were also involved. In sum, there was a radical novelty to this event, even for people who knew or had contributed themselves to Holocaust historiography.

Writing *Neighbors* – a simple task from the vantage point of a historian's craft since it was a well-circumscribed story based on a limited number of sources – had been emotionally and intellectually very difficult. Tony Judt recalls in the volume of conversations with Tim Snyder how I talked to him at the time of the writing, utterly perplexed by what happened in Jedwabne, and the events' implications. I also worried whether I would be able to find a publisher in Poland. This troubled me because I was persuaded that the book must come out in Polish before it saw the light of day in the English language. I didn't know what reaction disclosure of the Jedwabne murders would produce, and certainly did not anticipate the national debate across all media lasting for over six months, which *Neighbors* triggered. But I thought that the Polish public – whether limited only to scholars, or including others as well – should have a chance to reflect on and discuss the content of the book before anybody else.

I recalled the publisher of *Horrible Decade* telling me how for the first time in his career his employees in the printer's shop protested about the content of a manuscript. The book was published regardless, but *Horrible Decade*, compared with *Neighbors*, was high- brow and much less direct about the complicity of Poles in the persecution of Jews during the war. In the end I sent the manuscript to a friend, Krzysztof Czyzewski at the Borderlands Foundation, who realized its importance, and put it out quickly.

The book was published in May 2000, just in time for the Warsaw Book Fair. Immediately, still in May, a journalist from the center-right daily *Rzeczpospolita* went to Jedwabne to check the story and confirmed, by talking to the town's inhabitants, that indeed the local Poles and not the Germans (as the inscription on the official monument commemorating the event proclaimed) committed the murders in 1941. Apart from that, except for scathing remarks in a populist Catholic daily that the book was all anti-Polish propaganda, for the first six months after the publication of *Neighbors* there was, practically, no reaction.

Pogranicze, as the Borderlands publishing house is called in Polish, is a small, boutique publisher with limited distribution. Whether this played a role in the delayed reaction, I do not know. Later on, when the national debate was already in full swing, Czyzewski put an electronic version of the book on *Pogranicze*'s website, so that anyone with a computer could download *Neighbors* free of charge. When meeting with student audiences in the Spring of 2001 at university campuses, I would often be asked to autograph computer print-outs of the book.

But these were early days of website browsing. It was important, I felt, to make sure that people could have easy and inexpensive access to the contents of the book, or else, given the intense discussion ranging in all the media, they would get to know the Jedwabne story only via the partisan views of commentators.

I approached the daily *Rzeczpospolita* which had provided an extensive and ecumenical coverage of the story from the beginning, prepared a digest of the book about half as long as the original (which was short to begin with), and the paper published it as a center spread in one of its weekend editions.

Writing *Neighbors* and reflecting, in the light of events in Jedwabne, on the significance of what had happened to Jews in Poland during the war posed a double quandary. The first outstanding issue on my mind after completing *Neighbors* was to figure out how historians of the war period could have missed the story of the massacre in Jedwabne for so long. The publication of two volumes of essays and documents by the Institute of National Memory in 2002 entitled *Wokol Jedwabnego* (Concerning Jedwabne)– which was the result of an official Polish investigation of the Jedwabne murder – rendered this question moot. In the Preface to this important publication the editors, summarizing the findings of the team of scholars who researched the matter, wrote that Jedwabne was but an episode in a two- or three-month long killing spree during which Polish neighbors kept murdering local Jews in some two dozen villages in the Podlasie region!

Mind you, these acts of violence were perpetrated openly. Everyone in the vicinity knew about what happened, and many participated directly. This means that there were tens, indeed hundreds of thousands of people who had personal knowledge of these events. And this knowledge remained active in local communities after the war, passed along from one generation to the next. Journalists who visited the area in the year 2000, before the story became a focus of national debate, discovered that even young people were knowledgeable about the murders and knew that the locals, rather than Germans, were responsible. And yet, none of this had entered into the historiography of the period!! It is somewhat disappointing, I must confess, that members of the historical profession in Poland have not reflected since, on the reasons why this had been so. The topic, I suppose, is still awaiting an ambitious Ph.D. student.

Secondly, I was bewildered how could I have been ignorant for so long about the widespread complicity of the local population in the persecution of Polish Jews during the war. Not that I doubted my ability to think as a historian and draw proper conclusions from amassed evidence. An earlier generation of historians was responsible for this blind spot in Polish historiography, as I didn't apprentice in the craft as a student and came to the discipline rather late in my academic career, by way of social sciences and physics. Something else, of a personal nature, bothered me about my long-lasting ignorance.

I had a wonderfully open relationship with my parents. We talked about everything, especially with my mother, who was a brilliant, sophisticated and very spiritual person. How could she not have communicated to me the depth of

demoralization of the Polish population during the occupation as manifested in the widespread murderous hostility towards the Jews, I wondered? After all this mattered to her intimately – her first husband was denounced as a Jew and killed in 1943. And later, after she met my father, also an assimilated Polish Jew, she again had to rack her brains how to keep him safe.

I remembered very well the story she told about smuggling him out from a transit camp in Pruszkow, where they found themselves together with most of the inhabitants of Warsaw, after the 1944 Uprising. When they got out of the camp she still had to figure out where to find a hiding place, and she decided to take him to her aunt's small estate near Czestochowa. It would be the safest place, she said (chuckling as was her manner when she phrased a paradox or a bon mot), because local peasants would never entertain the idea that the young lady from the "palace" [that's how local people called it, but what I saw on photographs was not much of a palace] could bring a Jew along as fiancé. I always felt that there was a more ominous significance to this casual and "amusing" remark than it seemed.

But there were more reasons than just her personal concern for the men she loved, why she should have been aware of this matter. My mother served as a courier in the Bureau of Information and Propaganda of the Home Army during the war, where her first husband, Stanislaw Wertheim, had been an editor of an internal bulletin called "Current News," (*Wiadomosci Biezace*) collating social and political information coming from all over occupied Poland to Home Army headquarters. Consequently, she was as well informed as anyone about what was going on in the society under occupation. Why, I wondered, had I not learned from her what later took me dozens of years to figure out on my own? She must have known about what was going on. Or didn't she? Because if she knew, it would have shaken her to the core and we would have talked about it at home, I thought. Wartime was a frequent subject of conversations also between my parents and their friends who came to visit [restaurants were expensive and pretty horrible in Soviet bloc countries, and people preferred to socialize at home], while I hung out in the dining room listening to what they were talking about. And the issue, as best I remember, never came up.

It was too late to ask her or my father why it was so, since they were both deceased by the time I thought of the matter. So, in search of an answer, I decided to find out what the underground authorities did know about the mass killings of Jews by their Polish neighbors at the time when these atrocities took place. It turned out that the question can be easily answered, again thanks to the selfsame investigation of the Jedwabne murder launched by the Institute of National Memory in 2001.

In the second volume of *Wokol Jedwabnego*, a section entitled "Documents of the Polish Underground State on the situation in the Bialystok region following June 22, 1941" contains reports about the killings of Podlasie Jews by their neighbors. It includes a July 4, 1941, dispatch to London from the Commander of the Home Army, General Rowecki, sent a whole week before the Jedwabne massacre took place: "First reports from the conquered territories reveal instinctive sympathy to liberators from under the Bolshevik oppression [i.e. towards the German troops]…. In Brzezc [a border town between what used to be the German and the Soviet zone of occupation of Poland], Poles liberated from prison organized a pogrom of Jews." Rowecki's telegram is followed by other reports informing about multiple locations where "the local Polish population carried out pogroms or even massacres of the Jews."[4]

In other words, the Home Army command and the leadership of the Underground State knew in real time about massacres of Jews by their Polish neighbors, but there is no evidence in the secret correspondence or in the underground press that the matter was followed up on in any fashion. How was it possible that such a wave of crimes against Polish citizens, committed over an extended period by numerous Poles, did not elicit curiosity, not to speak of a robust response, from the Polish underground authorities? After all the Underground State considered offsetting the demoralizing effects of Nazi occupation on the Poles as one of its primary responsibilities – and what could be more demoralizing than joining the Nazis in killing sprees of fellow Polish-citizens!?

I devoted an entire chapter in *Fear*, my next book after *Neighbors*, to musings about these questions. In essence, I argued, the Polish intelligentsia, screened out what was happening on the lower rungs of the Polish society from the narrative of Poland's wartime tragedy. Not so much because of its anti-Semitic prejudices, but because it was blinded by social distance. Acute awareness of class distinctions, a residual mentality from the time when nobility was still the ruling class in society, was deeply entrenched in the thinking habits of Poles throughout the interwar years as well. Even the progressive circles of the intelligentsia were not immune to it.

And so – since the drama of wartime experience was immersed in a rich symbolic brew reminiscent of the XIXth century story of the loss of Poland's independence and national uprisings – all that pertained to war and resistance (a spiritual realm endowed with symbolic significance) was sacred ground,

4 *Wokol Jedwabnego*, Pawel Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, eds., v.II, Dokumenty, Instytut Pamieci Narodowej, Warszawa, 2002, p. 130, 132.

reserved for the elite of the nation. Once upon a time it was a province of the nobility. Now, the tragic destiny of the country forged in the crucible of the Second World War, cast the Polish intelligentsia as the main protagonist. Indeed it was the intelligentsia's last grand turn on the historical stage, where it played a hero (as a repository of patriotic ethos and an architect of wartime resistance); a victim (as Soviet and Nazi occupiers targeted elites for particularly severe persecution); a narrator of current events (through penmenship in the proliferating underground publications); and eventually as interpreter of the experience, its record keeper, and its historian.

It should not come as a surprise, I concluded, that in such circumstances what went on between Jews and peasants was noted by underground rapporteurs, but only as local episodes without a larger significance. Such occurrences did not merit any other evaluation. By definition what went on "downstairs," between the common people and the Jews, could not have had a larger significance. It did not "deserve" to enter the mainstream myth-producing narrative about Poland's wartime struggles and victims.

There was, of course, local knowledge of the events, and it never dissipated, as journalists visiting Jedwabne sixty years after the murder of local Jews discovered. But the larger public, including the professionals whose business it was to register what happened (as rapporteurs working for the Underground State), could not translate this scattered information about local events, into knowledge about the epoch. This is what I told myself, and I haven't heard a better explanation yet of this glaring omission.

But it is water under the bridge now, as historians affiliated with the Center for Research about the Holocaust in the Polish Academy of Sciences since 2003 have kept publishing meticulously researched books and articles detailing the complicity of the local population in the murder and pillage of their Jewish neighbors. This is an amazing development, unique to Poland among all the countries situated to the east of Germany where 90% of all the Jews killed in the Holocaust resided until the war.

Today the history of the Holocaust in Poland is being written by a host of talented and committed Polish historians, anthropologists, social psychologists, literary critics, what have you. Twenty five years after the country regained its full sovereignty a major part of its past, disowned for six decades, is being reappropriated and returned by scholars to where it belongs – into the mainstream of XXth century Polish history.