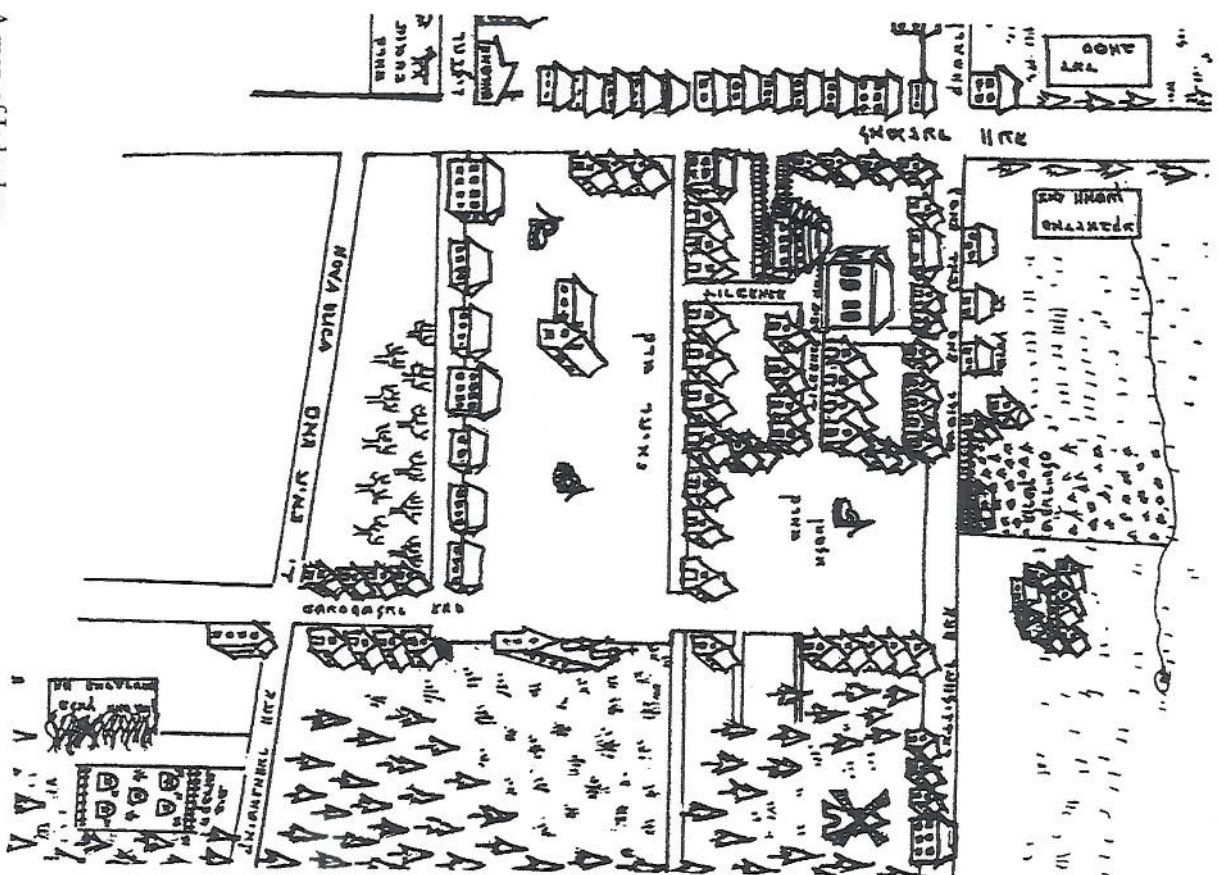


J A N T . G R O S S

*The
Destruction
of the Jewish
Community
in Jedwabne,
Poland*

NEIGHBORS

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS PRINCETON AND OXFORD



A map of Jedwabne
drawn by Julius Baker
(Yehuda Piekarz).

HISTORICAL STUDIES LIBRARY
HISTORICAL STUDIES LIBRARY
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

Copyright © 2001 by Princeton University Press
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press,
3 Market Place, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1SY
All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gross, Jan Tomasz.
[Sasiedzi. English]

Neighbors : the destruction of the Jewish community
in Jedwabne, Poland / Jan T. Gross.
p. cm.

Originally published: Sasiedzi: historia zagłady
żydowskiego miasteczka.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-691-08667-2 (alk. paper)

1. Jews—Poland—Jedwabne—History. 2. Holocaust,
Jewish (1939-1945)—Poland—Jedwabne. 3. Jedwabne
(Poland)—Ethnic relations. I. Title: Destruction of
the Jewish community in Jedwabne. II. Title.

DS135.P62 J444 2001
940.53'18'0943843—dc21 00-051685

This book has been composed in Janson
Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

www.pup.princeton.edu

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

616#107813

18 nov 2011

Amazon

Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.

—Abraham Lincoln,
Annual Message to Congress
DECEMBER 1, 1862

I

NTRODUCTION

Twentieth-century Europe has been shaped decisively by the actions of two men. It is to Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin that we owe totalitarianism—if not its invention, then certainly its most determined implementation. The loss of life for which they are jointly responsible is truly staggering. Yet it is not what happened but what has been prevented from ever taking place that gives a truer measure of totalitarianism's destructiveness: "the sum of unwritten books," as one author put it. In fact, the sum of thoughts unthought, of unfelt feelings, of works never accomplished, of lives unlived to their natural end.¹

Not only the goals but also the methods of totalitarian politics crippled societies where they were deployed, and among the most gripping was the institutionalization of resentment. People subject to Stalin's or Hitler's rule were repeatedly set against each other and encouraged to act on the basest instincts of mutual dislike. Every conceivable cleavage in society was eventually exploited, every antagonism exacerbated. At one time or another city was set against the countryside, workers against peasants, middle peasants against poor peasants, children against their parents, young against old, and ethnic groups against each other. Secret police encouraged, and thrived on, denunciations: *divide et impera* writ large. In addition, as social mobilization and mass participation in state-sponsored institutions and rituals were required, people became, to varying degrees, complicitous in their own subjugation.

Totalitarian rulers also imposed a novel pattern of occupation in the territories they conquered. As a result, wrote Hannah Arendt, "they who were the Nazis' first accomplices and their best aides truly did not know what they were doing nor with whom they were

dealing."² It turned out that there was no adequate word in European languages to define this relationship. The term "collaboration"—in its specific connotation of a morally objectionable association with an enemy—came into usage only in the context of the Second World War.³ Given that armed conflicts, conquests, wars, occupations, subjugations, territorial expansions, and their accompanying circumstances are as old as recorded human history, one wonders what novelty in the phenomenon of German occupation during the Second World War stimulated the emergence of a fresh concept.⁴ A comprehensive answer to this question would have to be sought in multiple studies of German regimes of occupation.

After the fact, public opinion all over Europe recoiled in disgust at virtually any form of engagement with the Nazis (in an arguably somewhat self-serving and not always sincere reaction). "It is nearly impossible to calculate the total number of persons targeted by post-war retribution, but, even by the most conservative estimates, they numbered several million, that is 2 or 3 percent of the population formerly under German occupation," writes

Istvan Deák in a recent study. "Punishments of the guilty ranged from lynchings during the last months of the war to postwar death sentencing, imprisonment, or hard labor. Added to those harsh punishments were condemnation to national dishonor, the loss of civic rights, and/or monetary fines as well as such administrative measures as expulsions, police supervision, loss of the right to travel or to live in certain desirable places, dismissal, and the loss of pension rights."⁵ "This was a war," to quote Heda Kovaly's poignant memoir from Prague, "that no one had quite survived."⁶

While the experience of the Second World War has to a large extent shaped the political makeup and destinies of all European societies in the second half of the twentieth century, Poland has been singularly affected. It was over the territory of the pre-1939 Polish state that Hitler and Stalin first joined in a common effort (their pact of nonaggression signed in August 1939 included a secret clause dividing the country in half) and then fought a bitter war until one of them was eventually destroyed. As a result Poland suffered a demographic catastrophe without precedent; close to 20 percent of its population died of war-

related causes. It lost its minorities—Jews in the Holocaust, and Ukrainians and Germans following border shifts and population movements after the war. Poland's elites in all walks of life were decimated. Over a third of its urban residents were missing at the conclusion of the war. Fifty-five percent of the country's lawyers were no more, along with 40 percent of its medical doctors and one-third of its university professors and Roman Catholic clergy.⁷ Poland was dubbed "God's playground" by a sympathetic British historian,⁸ but during that time it must have felt more like a stomping ground of the devil.

The centerpiece of the story I am about to present in this little volume falls, to my mind, utterly out of scale: 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. Consequently, in what follows, I will discuss the Jedwabne murders in the context of numerous themes invoked by the phrase "Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War."

First and foremost I consider this volume a challenge to standard historiography of the

Second World War, which posits that there are two separate wartime histories—one pertaining to the Jews and the other to all the other citizens of a given European country subjected to Nazi rule. This is a particularly untenable position with respect to Poland's history of those years, given the size of, and social space occupied by, Polish Jewry. On the eve of the war, Poland's was the second largest agglomeration of Jews in the world, after the American Jewry. About 10 percent of prewar Polish citizens identified themselves—either by Mosaic faith or by declaring Yiddish to be their mother tongue—as Jews. Nearly one-third of the Polish urban population was Jewish. And yet the Holocaust of Polish Jews has been bracketed by historians as a distinct, separate subject that only tangentially affects the rest of Polish society. Conventional wisdom maintains that only “socially marginal” individuals in Polish society—the so-called *szmalcownicy*,¹⁰ or “scum,” who blackmailed Jews, and the heroes who lent them a helping hand—were involved with the Jews.

This is not the place to argue in detail why such views are untenable. Perhaps it is

not even necessary to dwell at length on this matter. After all, *how can the wiping out of one-third of its urban population be anything other than a central issue of Poland's modern history?* In any case, one certainly needs no great methodological sophistication to grasp instantly that when the Polish half of a town's population murders its Jewish half, we have on our hands an event patently invalidating the view that these two ethnic groups' histories are disengaged.

The second point that readers of this volume must keep in mind is that Polish-Jewish relations during the war are conceived in a standard analysis as mediated by outside forces—the Nazis and the Soviets. This, of course, is correct as far as it goes. The Nazis and the Soviets were indeed calling the shots in the Polish territories they occupied during the war. But one should not deny the reality of autonomous dynamics in the relationships between Poles and Jews within the constraints imposed by the occupiers. There were things people could have done at the time and refrained from doing; and there were things they did not have to do but nevertheless did. Ac-

cordingly, I will be particularly careful to identify who did what in the town of Jedwabne on July 10, 1941, and at whose behest.

In August 1939, as is well known, Hitler and Stalin concluded a pact of nonaggression. Its secret clauses demarcated the boundaries of influence spheres between the two dictators in Central Europe. One month later the territory of Poland was carved out between the Third Reich and the USSR. The town of Jedwabne first found itself in the Soviet zone of occupation and later, after Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, was taken over by the Nazis. An important issue I thus felt compelled to address concerns the standard historiographical perspective on Soviet-Jewish relations during the twenty-month-long Soviet rule over the half of Poland the Red Army occupied starting in September 1939. Again this is not the place to put the matter to rest.¹¹ We will simply have to remember that according to the current stereotype Jews enjoyed a privileged relationship with the Soviet occupiers. Allegedly the Jews collaborated with the Soviets at the expense of the Poles, and therefore an outburst of brutal Polish antisemitism, at the time the Nazis invaded the USSR, may have come in the terri-

ories liberated from under Bolshevik rule in 1941 as a response to this experience. I therefore explore whether there were any linkages between what happened in Jedwabne under the Soviet occupation (September 1939–June 1941) and immediately thereafter.

The Jedwabne massacre touches upon yet another historiographical topos concerning this epoch—one maintaining that Jews and communism were bound by a mutually beneficial relationship. Hence, allegedly, the presence of antisemitism among broad strata of Polish society (or any other East European society, for that matter) after the war, and the special role Jews played in establishing and consolidating Stalinism in Eastern Europe. I will address this issue briefly in the discussion of my study's sources and will return to these and related matters in the concluding chapters.

As to the broader context of Holocaust studies, this book cannot be easily located on the functionalist–intentionalist spectrum. It stands askew of this distinction, already blurred in recent Holocaust historiography, and belongs instead to a genre—“only now beginning to receive appropriate scholarly atten-

tion”—that belabors the “petrators-victims-bystanders” axis.¹² But it shows that these terms are also fuzzy and can be read as a reminder that each episode of mass killing had its own situational dynamics. This is not a trivial point, for it means—and further studies will, I think, demonstrate that Jedwabne was not unique in this respect—that in each episode many specific individual decisions were made by different actors present on the scene, who decisively influenced outcomes. And, thus, it is at least conceivable that a number of those actors could have made different choices, with the result that many more European Jews could have survived the war.

In an important respect, however, this is a rather typical book about the Holocaust. For, as is not true of historical studies we write about other topics, I do not see the possibility of attaining closure here. In other words, the reader will not emerge with a sense of satisfied yearning for knowledge at the conclusion of reading; I certainly did not do so at the conclusion of writing. I could not say to myself when I got to the last page, “Well, I understand now,” and I doubt that my readers will be able to either.

Of course one must proceed with the exposition and analysis *as if* it were possible to understand, and address prevailing interpretive historiographical strands. But I think it is in the nature of the subject matter that we will have to pose queries at the end of the story—and how about this? and how about that? And this is just as well, since perhaps the only relief we may hope to find when confronted with the Holocaust is in the process of asking such endless follow-up questions, to which we will continue to look for answers. The Holocaust thus stands at a point of departure rather than a point of arrival in humankind’s ceaseless efforts to draw lessons from its own experience. And while we will never “understand” why it happened, we must clearly understand the implications of its having taken place. In this sense it becomes a foundational event of modern sensibility, forever afterward to be an essential consideration in reflections about the human condition.

OUTLINE OF THE STORY

On January 8, 1949, in the small town of Jedwabne, some nineteen kilometers from Łomża in Poland's historical province of Mazowsze, security police detained fifteen men. We find their names in a memorandum ominously called *Raport likwidacyjny* (A liquidation report) among the so-called control-investigative files (*akta kontrolno-sledcze*) kept by the security police to monitor their own progress in each investigation.¹ Among the arrested, mostly small farmers and seasonal workers, there were two shoemakers, a mason, a carpenter, two locksmiths, a letter carrier, and a former town-hall receptionist. Some were family men (one a father of six children,

another of four), some still unattached. The youngest was twenty-seven years old, the oldest sixty-four. They were, to put it simply, a bunch of ordinary men.²

Jedwabne's inhabitants, at the time totaling about two thousand, must have been shocked by the simultaneous arrests of so many local residents.³ The wider public got a glimpse of the whole affair four months later, when, on May 16 and 17 in the District Court of Łomża, Bolesław Ramotowski and twenty-one codefendants were put on trial. The opening sentence of the indictment reads, "Jewish Historical Institute in Poland sent materials to the Ministry of Justice describing criminal activities of the inhabitants of Jedwabne who engaged in the murder of Jewish people, as stated in the testimony of Szmul Wąsersztajn who witnessed the pogrom of the Jews."⁴

There are no records at the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) telling us how or when Wąsersztajn's deposition was communicated to the prosecutor's office. On the basis of the court files, likewise, it is impossible to know, for example, when the prosecution was informed about what had happened in Jedwabne, and why the indictment was so long

delayed. The control-investigative files from the Łomża Security Office shed some light on the matter, but they are also inconclusive.⁵ In any case, Wąsersztajn gave his testimony before the Jewish Historical Commission in Białystok on April 5, 1945. And this is what he said:

Before the war broke out, 1,600 Jews lived in Jedwabne, and only seven survived, saved by a Polish woman, Wyrzykowska, who lived in the vicinity.

On Monday evening, June 23, 1941, Germans entered the town. And as early as the 25th local bandits, from the Polish population, started an anti-Jewish pogrom. Two of those bandits, Borowski (Borowiuk?) Wacek with his brother Mitek, walked from one Jewish dwelling to another together with other bandits playing accordion and flute to drown the screams of Jewish women and children. I saw with my own eyes how those murderers killed Chajcia Wąsersztajn, Jakub Kac, seventy-three years old, and Eliasz Krwiewicki.

Jakub Kac they stoned to death with bricks. Krwiewicki they knifed and then plucked his eyes and cut off his tongue. He suffered terribly for twelve hours before he gave up his soul.

On the same day I observed a horrible scene.

Chajja Kubrzańska, twenty-eight years old, and Basia Binsztajn, twenty-six years old, both holding newborn babies, when they saw what was going on, they ran to a pond, in order to drown themselves with the children rather than fall into the hands of bandits. They put their children in the water and drowned them with their own hands: then Baśka Binsztajn jumped in and immediately went to the bottom, while Chajja Kubrzańska suffered for a couple of hours. Assembled hooligans made a spectacle of this. They advised her to lie face down in the water, so that she would drown faster. Finally, seeing that the children were already dead, she threw herself more energetically into the water and found her death too.

The next day a local priest intervened, explaining that they should stop the pogrom, and that German authorities would take care of things by themselves. This worked, and the pogrom was stopped. From this day on the local population no longer sold foodstuffs to Jews, which made their circumstances all the more difficult. In the meantime rumors spread that the Germans would issue an order that all the Jews be destroyed.

Such an order was issued by the Germans on July 10, 1941.

Even though the Germans gave the order, it was Polish hoodligans who took it up and carried it out, using the most horrible methods. After various tortures and humiliations, they burned all the Jews in a barn. During the first pogrom and the later bloodbath the following outcasts distinguished themselves by their brutality: Szeleziński, Karolak, Borowiuk (Borowski?) Młetek, Borowiuk (Borowski?) Władaw, Jermakowski, Ramutowski Bolek, Rogalski Bolek, Szelawa Stanisław, Szelawa Franciszek, Kozłowski Geniek, Trzaska, Tarnoczek Jerzyk, Ludański Jurek, Laciez Czesław.

On the morning of July 10, 1941, eight gestapo men came to town and had a meeting with representatives of the town authorities. When the gestapo asked what their plans were with respect to the Jews, they said, unanimously, that all Jews must be killed. When the Germans proposed to leave one Jewish family from each profession, local carpenter Bronisław Szeleziński, who was present, answered: We have enough of our own craftsmen, we have to destroy all the Jews, none should stay alive. Mayor Karolak and everybody else agreed with his words. For this purpose Sze-

ziński gave his own barn, which stood nearby. After this meeting the bloodbath began.

Local hoodligans armed themselves with axes, special clubs studded with nails, and other instruments of torture and destruction and chased all the Jews into the street. As the first victims of their devilish instincts they selected seventy-five of the youngest and healthiest Jews, whom they ordered to pick up a huge monument of Lenin that the Russians had erected in the center of town. It was impossibly heavy, but under a rain of horrible blows the Jews had to do it. While carrying the monument, they also had to sing until they brought it to the designated place. There, they were ordered to dig a hole and throw the monument in. Then these Jews were butchered to death and thrown into the same hole.

The other brutality was when the murderers ordered every Jew to dig a hole and bury all previously murdered Jews, and then those were killed and in turn buried by others. It is impossible to represent all the brutalities of the hoodligans, and it is difficult to find in our history of suffering something similar.

Bears of old Jews were burned, newborn babies were killed at their mothers' breasts, people were beaten murderously and forced to sing and

dance. In the end they proceeded to the main action—the burning. The entire town was surrounded by guards so that nobody could escape; then Jews were ordered to line up in a column, four in a row, and the ninety-year-old rabbi and the shochet [Kosher butcher] were put in front, they were given a red banner, and all were ordered to sing and were chased into the barn. Hoologans bestially beat them up on the way. Near the gate a few hoologans were standing, playing various instruments in order to drown the screams of horrified victims. Some tried to defend themselves, but they were defenseless. Bloodied and wounded, they were pushed into the barn. Then the barn was doused with kerosene and lit, and the bandits went around to search Jewish bones, to look for the remaining sick and children. The sick people they found they carried to the barn themselves, and as for the little children, they roped a few together by their legs and carried them on their backs, then put them on pitchforks and threw them onto smoldering coals.

After the fire they used axes to knock golden teeth from still not entirely decomposed bodies and in other ways violated the corpses of holy martyrs.⁶

While it is clear to a reader of Wasersztajn's deposition that Jews were annihilated in Jedwabne with particular cruelty, it is difficult at first to fully absorb the meaning of his testimony. And, in a way, I am not at all surprised that four years had elapsed between the time when he made his statement and the beginning of the Łomża trial. This is, more or less, the amount of time that elapsed between my discovery of Wasersztajn's testimony in JHI's archives and my grasp of its factuality. When in the autumn of 1998 I was asked to contribute an article to a Festschrift prepared for Professor Tomasz Strzembosz—a well-known historian who specialized in wartime history of the Białystok region—I decided to use the example of Jedwabne to describe how Polish neighbors mistreated their Jewish cocitizens. But I did not fully register then that after the series of killings and cruelties described by Wasersztajn, at the end of the day *all* the remaining Jews were actually burned alive in a barn (I must have read this as a hyperbolic trope, concluding that only some had been killed that way). A few months after I submitted my essay, I watched raw footage for the

documentary film *Where Is My Older Brother Cain?* made by Agnieszka Arnold, who, among other interlocutors, spoke with the daughter of Bronisław Śleszyński, and I realized that Wąsersztajn has to be taken literally.

As the book had not yet been published, I wondered whether I should withdraw my chapter. However, I decided to leave the chapter unchanged, because one important aspect of the Jedwabne story concerns the slow dawning of Polish awareness of this horrendous crime. How did this event figure (or, rather, fail to figure) in the consciousness of historians of the war period—myself included? How did the population of Jedwabne live for three generations with the knowledge of these murders? How will the Polish citizenry process the revelation when it becomes public knowledge?

In any case, once we realize that what seems inconceivable is precisely what happened, a historian soon discovers that the whole story is very well documented, that witnesses are still alive, and that the memory of this crime has been preserved in Jedwabne through the generations.

SOURCES

The best sources for a historian are those that provide a contemporaneous account of the events under scrutiny. My first step, therefore, was to seek German documentation of the destruction of Jews in this territory. Such documentation may exist somewhere, but I was not able to find it. Various scholars of the period whom I queried were unfamiliar with the place-name Jedwabne. In the daily summary reports of the *Einsatzgruppen*'s activities from the Eastern Front, where such information would have been included, Jedwabne is not mentioned. This is not surprising, since *Einsatzgruppe B*, which would earlier have been active in the Łomża area, on July 10 was

THE MURDER

It all began, as we remember, with the convocation on the morning of July 10th of all adult Polish males to Jedwabne's town hall. But rumors about the planned assault on the Jews must have been circulating earlier. Otherwise, carts full of people from nearby hamlets would not have been converging on the town on this day since early dawn. I suspect that some of these people were veterans of murderous pogroms that had recently been carried out in the vicinity. It was typical, when a "wave of pogroms" swept over some area, that in addition to local participants unique to each locality, a core group of plunderers kept moving from place to place.¹

"On a certain day, at the request of Karolak and Sobuta, several dozen men assembled in front of the city hall in Jedwabne and were equipped by the German gendarmerie and Karolak and Sobuta with whips and clubs. Then Karolak and Sobuta ordered the assembled men to bring to the square in front of the town hall all the Jews of Jedwabne." In an earlier testimony witness Danowski added one more detail to this crisp narrative by pointing out that people were served vodka on the occasion, though nobody else confirmed this.²

More or less at the same time that Poles were called to the town hall, Jews were ordered to assemble at the square for, allegedly, some cleaning duty. Rivka Fogel recalled that she meant to bring along a broom. Since Jews had previously been pressed into debasing cleanup jobs, one could imagine at first that this was to be but a routine exercise in humiliation. "My husband took our two children and went there. I stayed at home for a while trying to put things in order and lock the doors and windows properly."³ But it became clear almost instantly that the circumstances were somehow different on that day. Mrs. Fogel did not follow her husband and children to the

square; instead, together with a neighbor, Mrs. Pravde, she hid in the nearby garden of a nobleman's estate. And a few moments later "we could hear from there the terrible cries of a young boy, Joseph Levin, whom the goyim were beating to death."⁴

By some uncanny coincidence we learn from the testimony of Karol Bardoń, who happened to be passing by in the vicinity a few moments later, that Lewin had been stoned to death. Bardoń, we recall, was repairing a car this morning in the courtyard of the German gendarmerie's outpost and had to go to the toolshed on the nobleman's estate (in whose garden the two women were hiding). "Around the corner from the foundry adjacent to the toolshed an inhabitant of Jedwabne, Wiśniewski, was standing. . . . Wiśniewski called me, and I came closer and Wiśniewski pointed to a massacred cadaver of a young man of Mosaic persuasion, about twenty-two years old, whose name was Lewin, and said to me, Look, mister, we killed this SOB with stones. . . . Wiśniewski showed me a stone weighing twelve to fourteen kilograms and said, I smacked him good with this stone and he won't get up any

more."⁵ This took place at the very beginning of the pogrom. As Bardoń writes, on his way to the toolshed he saw a group of only about a hundred Jews on the square; by the time he was on his way back, the assemblage had grown considerably.

In another part of town Wincenty Gościcki had just returned home from a night watchman's job. "In the morning when I went to bed, my wife came and told me to get up and said that bad things were going on. Near our house people were beating Jews with clubs. I got up then and went outside the house. Then I was called by Urbanowski who told me, Look what is going on, and showed me four Jewish corpses. These were 1. Fiszman, 2. the two Styjakowskis [?] and Blubert. I, then, I hid in the house."⁶

From early on that day the Jews understood that they were in mortal danger. Many tried to escape into neighboring fields, but only a few succeeded. It was difficult to get out of town without being noticed, as small vigilante groups of peasants were milling around trying to ferret out and catch hiding and fleeing Jews. A dozen teenagers grabbed

Nielawicki, who was already in the fields when the pogrom began, as he was trying to sneak across the fields to Wizna. He was beaten up and brought to the square. Similarly Olszewicz was caught in the fields by peasant youths, beaten up, and brought back to town. Some one to two hundred people managed to run away, hide, and survive that day—among them, as we know, Nielawicki and Olszewicz. But many others were killed on the spot, right where they were apprehended. On his trip to the toolshed Bardoń saw “on the left side of the road, in the fields belonging to the estate, *civilians* [author’s emphasis] mounted on horses, wielding thick wooden clubs,” who were patrolling the area.⁷ A horseman could easily spot people hiding in the fields and then catch up with them. Jedwabne Jews were doomed.

On this day a cacophony of violence swept through the town. It unfolded in the form of many uncoordinated, simultaneous initiatives over which Karolak and the town council exercised only general supervision (as we remember, they went around enlisting people for guard duty on the square, for example). They monitored progress and made sure at critical junctures that the goal of the pogrom

was advanced. But otherwise people were free to improvise as best they knew how.

Bardoń, on his way to the toolshed one more time later in the day, he stumbled on Wiśniewski in the same place as before, near Lewin’s body.

I understood that Wiśniewski was waiting here for something. I took all the necessary parts from the toolshed, and on my way back I met the same two young men whom I had seen when I went to the toolshed for the first time that morning [he later identifies them as Jerzy Laudanski and Kalinowski]. I understood that they were coming to Wiśniewski to the place where Lewin had been killed, and they were bringing another man of Mosaic persuasion, a married owner of the mechanical mill where I had been employed till March 1939, called Hersb Zdrojewicz. They held him under the arms and blood was flowing from his head over his neck and onto his torso. Zdrojewicz said to me, Save me, Mister Bardoń. Being afraid of these murderers, I replied, I cannot help you with anything, and I passed them by.⁸

And thus in one part of town Laudanski with Wiśniewski and Kalinowski were stoning to

death Lewin and Zdrojewicz; in front of Gościcki's house four Jews were clubbed to death by somebody else; in the pond near Łomżyńska Street a certain "Łuba Władysław . . . drowned two Jewish blacksmiths"; in still another location Czesław Mierzejewski raped and then killed Judes Ibram;⁹ the beautiful Gitele Nadolny (Nadolnik), the youngest daughter of the *melamed* (kheyder teacher), whom everybody knew because they had learned to read in her father's house, had her head cut off, and the murderers, we are told, later kicked it around;¹¹ at the square "Dobrzańska asked for water [it was a hot summer day], then fainted; no one was allowed to help her, and her mother was killed because she wanted to bring water; [while] Betka Brzozowska was killed with a baby in her arms."¹² Jews were mercilessly beaten all this time, and their houses, in the meantime, were plundered.¹³

Simultaneously with multiple individual actions, more organized forms of persecution were also engulfing Jewish victims, who were driven in groups to the cemetery to be killed wholesale. "They took healthier men and chased them to the cemetery and ordered

them to dig a pit, and after it was dug out, Jews were killed every which way, one with iron, another with a knife, still another with a club."¹⁴ "Stanisław Szelawa was murdering with an iron hook, [stabbing] in the stomach. The witness [Szmul Wazersztajn, whose second deposition held in the Jewish Historical Institute I am now quoting] was hiding in the bushes. He heard the screaming. They killed twenty-eight men in one place from among the strongest. Szelawa took away one Jew. His tongue was cut off. Then a long silence."¹⁵ The murderers got excited and were working at a frantic pace. "I stood on Przytułska Street," said an older woman, Bronisława Kąlinowska, "and Jerzy Laukański, inhabitant of Jedwabne, was running down the street, and he said that he had already killed two or three Jews; he was very nervous and ran along."¹⁶

But it must soon have become apparent that fifteen hundred people cannot be killed by such primitive methods in a day. So the perpetrators decided to kill all the Jews at once, by burning them together. This very same method had been used a few days earlier, during the Radziłów pogrom. For whatever reason, however, the script does not seem to have

been finalized in advance, since there was no agreed-upon location where the mass killing was supposed to take place. Józef Chrzanowski testified to this: "When I came to the square, they [Sobuta and Wasilewski] told me to give my barn to burn the jews. But I started pleading to spare my barn, to which they agreed and left my barn in peace, only told me to help them chase the jews to Bronisław Śleszyński's barn."¹⁷

The murderers were determined to take away their victims' dignity before they took their lives. "I saw how Sobuta and Wasilewski took some dozen Jews from among the assembled and ordered them to do some ridiculous gymnastics exercises."¹⁸ Before the Jews were chased along on their last brief journey from the square to the barn where they would all perish, Sobuta and his colleagues organized a sideshow. During the Soviet occupation a statue of Lenin had been erected in town, right next to the main square. So "a group of Jews was brought to the little square to fell Lenin's statue. When Jews broke the statue, they were told to put its various pieces on some boards and carry it around, and the rabbi

was told to walk in front with his hat on a stick, and all had to sing, 'The war is because of us, the war is for us.' While carrying the statue all the Jews were chased toward the barn, and the barn was doused with gasoline and lit, and in this manner fifteen hundred Jewish people perished."¹⁹

In the immediate vicinity of the barn, as we remember, a thick crowd was milling, helping to shove the beaten, wounded, and terrorized Jews inside. "We chased jews under the barn," Czesław Laudanski would later report, "and we ordered them to enter inside, and the jews had to enter inside."²⁰

From the inside of the barn we are told two stories. One concerns Michał Kuropatwa, a coachman, who some time earlier had helped a Polish army officer hide from his Soviet pursuers. When the self-styled leaders of the pogrom noticed him in the Jewish crowd, he was taken out and told that because he had helped a Polish officer earlier, he might now go home. But he refused, choosing to share the fate of his people.²¹

The barn was then doused with kerosene, issued at the warehouse by Antoni Niebrzy-

dowski to his brother Jerzy and Eugeniusz Kalinowski. "They brought the eight liters of kerosene that I had issued to them and doused the barn filled with Jews and lit it up; what followed I do not know."²² But we do know—the Jews were burned alive. At the last moment Janek Neumark managed to tear himself away from this hell. A surge of hot air must have blown the barn door open. He was standing right next to it with his sister and her five-year-old daughter. Staszek Sielawa barred their exit, wielding an ax. But Neumark wrestled it away from him and they managed to run away and hide in the cemetery. The last thing he remembered from inside was the sight of his father, already engulfed in flames.²³

The fire must have spread unevenly. It appears to have moved from east to west, perhaps on account of the wind. Afterward, in the east wing of the incinerated building a few charred corpses could be found; there were some more in the center, and toward the western end a multitude of the dead were piled up. The bodies in the upper layer of the heap had been consumed by fire, but those beneath had been crushed and asphyxiated, their clothes in

many cases remaining intact. "They were so intertwined with one another that bodies could not be disentangled," recalled an elderly peasant who, as a young boy, had been sent with a group of local men to bury the dead. And he added a detail in unwitting confirmation of Wąsersztajn's chilling testimony: "In spite of this people were trying to search the corpses, looking for valuables sewn into clothing. I touched a Brolin shoe-polish box. It clinked. I cut it through with a shovel, and some coins glittered—I think golden tsarist five-ruble coins. People jumped over to collect them, and this drew the attention of onlooking gendarmes. They searched everybody. And if someone put the find in his pocket, they took it away and gave him a good shove. But anyone who hid it in his shoe saved the catch."²⁴

The worst murderer of the whole lot was probably a certain Kobrzyński. We are also told by some witnesses that he was the one who ignited the barn. "Later people said that the most Jews were killed by citizen Kobrzyński—I don't know his first name," recalls witness Edward Śleszyński, in whose father's barn most of Jedwabne's Jews were killed on

that day. "He apparently personally killed eighteen jews and participated the most in the burning of the barn."²⁵ Housewife Aleksandra Karowska knew from Kobrzyński himself that he had "knifed to death eighteen jews. He said this in my apartment when he was putting up the stove."²⁶

It was the middle of a very hot July, and the burned and asphyxiated corpses of murder victims had to be buried quickly. But there were no more Jews in town who could be ordered to accomplish this grisly task. "Late in the evening," recalls Wincenty Gościński, "I was taken by the Germans to bury those burned corpses. But I could not do this because when I saw this, I started to vomit and I was released from burying the cadavers."²⁷ Apparently he was not the only one who couldn't stomach the job, since "on the second or the third day after the murder," we are told once again by Bardoń, "I was standing with Mayor Karolak in the square not far from the outpost, and the commander of the outpost of the German gendarmerie in Jedwabne, Adamy, came up and said to the mayor with emphasis, So, kill people and burn them you

managed, eh? but bury them no one is eager to, eh? by morning, all must be buried! Understood?"²⁸ This angry outburst by the local gendarmerie commander quickly became the talk of the town. Sixty years later Leon Dziędzic from Przestrzele near Jedwabne could still quote his words: "You insisted that you'd put things in order with the Jews [*że zrobić porządek z Żydami*], but you don't know how to put things in order at all.' He [the German gendarme] was afraid that an epidemic might break out because it was very hot and dogs were already getting at [the corpses]."²⁹ But this was an "impossible job," as Leon Dziędzic further clarified in another interview. For the piled-up bodies of Jewish victims were entwined with one another "as roots of a tree. Somebody hit upon the idea that we should tear them into pieces and throw these pieces into the dugout. They brought pitchforks, and we tore the bodies as best we could: here a head, there a leg."³⁰

After July 10th, Poles were no longer permitted to kill the Jews of Jedwabne at will. The routine of the German occupation administration was reestablished. A few survivors re-

turned to town. They lingered there for a while—a few worked at the gendarmerie outpost—and in the end they were driven by the Nazis to the ghetto in Łomża. About a dozen people survived the war. Seven of the total had been hidden and cared for in the nearby Jan-czewo hamlet, by the Wyrzykowski family.

P LUNDER

One big subject is omitted from the sources and testimonies at our disposal. What happened to the property of the Jedwabne Jews? Those Jews who survived the war knew that they had lost everything. As to who took over the property, or how it was disposed of, this is not a subject they address in their memorial book. During interrogations in the 1949 and 1953 trials, neither the witnesses nor the accused were asked questions about this either. So we are left with but a few bits and pieces of information.

According to Eliaasz Grądzowski the following people grabbed Jewish property during and after the pogrom: Gienek Kozłowski,

Józef Sobuta, Rozalia Śleszyńska, and Józef Chrzanowski. Julia Sokołowska adds to this list the names of Karol Bardoń, Fredek Stefany, Kazimierz Karwowski, and the two Kobrzeńickis. Abram Boruszczak says the same about the Laudąński brothers and Anna Polkowska.¹ But all this testimony lacks specific details and makes only vague allusions to the appropriation of Jewish property by perpetrators of the pogrom. Józef Sobuta's wife, Stanisława, provided more concrete information when she explained during her husband's trial that they had "moved into a 'leftover' Jewish dwelling [the house of the Stern family] at the request of the surviving son of the owner, who had been killed, because he was afraid to live there alone."² Witness Sulewski states that he "does not know" who gave permission to the Sobuta couple to take over a Jewish house, and then adds, "As far as I know leftover Jewish dwellings could be taken over without anybody's permission."³

This strikes me as a rather naive, if not disingenuous, view of the matter; and, in fact, the wife of Stanisław Sielawa gives a more general aperçu of the "leftover" Jewish property question, which suggests that the same

people who had organized the pogrom afterward took charge of Jewish property as well (recall that both Wąsersztajn's and Neumark's depositions name the Sielawa brothers among the most active participants of the pogrom). "I heard from the local people, but I don't remember from whom exactly, that Sobuta Józef with the mayor of Jedwabne, Karolak, after the murder of the Jews of Jedwabne [the phrase used in the deposition—*po wymordowaniu Żydów w Jedwabnym*—could just as well be translated as "after having murdered the Jews of Jedwabne"] participated in transporting the leftover Jewish property to some warehouse, but I do not know exactly how this transporting was done, and I also don't know whether Sobuta Józef took for himself some of the leftover Jewish property."⁴ During her court appearance she gets even more specific: "I saw how they transported Jewish things, but the accused [i.e., Sobuta] only stood next to the horse cart with things, and I do not know whether the accused belonged to this business [my emphasis; *czy oskarżony należał do tego interesu*]."⁵

A few words might be in order here once again about the Śleszyński's barn. On January

11, 1949—that is, immediately after the wave of arrests swept through town—the Łomża Security Office (UB) received a letter from a certain Henryk Krystowczyk. He was using the opportunity created by the opening of an investigation into the massacre of Jedwabne Jews, Krystowczyk wrote, to raise another issue: “In April 1945 my brother Zygmunt Krystowczyk was assassinated, because as a member of the PPR [Polish Workers’ Party—this was the name that the Polish Communist Party bore at the time] he was ordered to organize a ZSCh [a peasant cooperative]—a task he accomplished. Then he was elected chairman of the cooperative. While he was chairman of the ZSCh, he began renovation of a steam mill near Przyszczelska Street, a leftover Jewish property.” Krystowczyk proceeds to describe the circumstances of his brother’s murder, who was involved in it, and how the culprit wanted to take over the mill. He explains that the building materials used for renovation were provided by his brother, who was a carpenter by profession. “The wood for renovation came from the barn of citizen Bronisław Śleszyński, which we took down because the Germans had built it for him to replace

the old barn, which he gave voluntarily to kill the Jews, and which burned down together with the Jews.”⁶

Thus, as we see, the so-called leftover Jewish property remained a hotly contested issue in town, involving assassinations and denunciations to the Security Office, as late as 1949. It shows up in several documents of the secret police at the time. The original denunciation reporting the sighting of Mayor Karolak after the war on a Warsaw street contains the statement “He was arrested by the German authorities, as far as I know, because of all the riches he took from the Jews and did not divide equally with the Germans.” In another anonymous denunciation concerning various dealings of the Łaudański family, the informant asserts that Jerzy Łaudański was arrested by the Germans while he was trying to smuggle jewelry robbed from the Jews. It also describes how another Łaudański, after the war, ostentatiously wore an elegant “Jewish” fur coat.⁷ All of this should not surprise us, since the effects of the Jedwabne Jews’ incineration were not unlike those of a neutron bomb dropped on some community: all the owners were eliminated, while their property remained intact.

And thus it must have been a very profitable “business,” indeed, for those who managed to lay their hands on it.

Given our growing awareness of the importance of material expropriation as a motivating factor in the persecution of the Jews all over Europe, I would think it very probable that the desire and unexpected opportunity to rob the Jews once and for all—rather than, or alongside with, atavistic antisemitism—was the real motivating force that drove Karolak and his cohort to organize the killing. Half a century after the massacre, people of Jedwabne, apparently, think likewise: “In Jedwabne everybody knew the truth [about the murder of the Jews], but people did not previously speak about it publicly. On Saturday, May 13, [2000], during a mass for the fatherland, the local priest called on parishioners to pray also for those victims of war who lost their lives because of the boundless, criminal desire of some people to enrich themselves.”⁸

I NTIMATE BIOGRAPHIES

In addition to protocols of interrogation of the witnesses and the accused we find, in the court files of Ramotowski and his associates, many other documents that were presented to the judicial authorities at different stages of the proceedings. I quoted earlier from the clemency petition filed by Karol Bardon, for example. My initial assessment leading to the conclusion that these were a “bunch of ordinary men” was based largely on information culled from the first page of each protocol. But we can tell more about the accused than simply their ages, how many children they sired, and what they did for a living.

A few days after the initial arrests in January 1949, wives of the arrested men started sending petitions to the Łomża Security Office laying out the special circumstances that, they hoped, would cast a better light on their husbands' role during the anti-Jewish pogrom. We can tease out from these texts interesting biographical details about the accused. Thus Irena Janowska, the wife of Aleksander, writes on January 28 that "on the critical day German gendarmerie walked around together with the mayor and the secretary [of the town council] Wasilewski, and chased out males to go and guard Jews who were assembled in the square. They came to my house as well, where they found my husband, and ordered him sternly, threatening with a gun, to go to the square. My husband was afraid, did not know exactly what was going on, and feared for himself because under the first Soviets he worked as an inspector in a milk cooperative."¹ Three days later Janina Żyluk writes a petition on behalf of her arrested husband (named by many witnesses as one of the main perpetrators): "My husband, until the Soviet-German war broke out in 1941, worked as a supervisor in tax collection. For this reason after the Germans

came in 1941 he had to hide, because everybody who worked for the Soviets was pursued and persecuted."²

We know that state bureaucracy vastly expanded under the Soviet administration, and that people had to make a living, and many therefore worked for the occupiers. Also, it may have seemed logical to a wife of a man arrested by Stalinist security police that his lot would improve when it came to be known that he had once worked for a Soviet administration. So I would not attribute to these two biographical snippets more than curiosity value were it not for the fact that there were additional revelations of this sort in the files. And they kept getting more and more interesting. Take, for instance, this confessional text by Karol Bardoń—the only man who received a death sentence in Ramotowski's case:

Following the Red Army's entrance into the Białyсток voivodeship, and after Soviet authorities were established in October of 1939, I returned to mending clocks, and occasionally, until April 20, 1940, I also carried out various commissioned jobs in my field of expertise for the NKVD and other Offices of Soviet Authorities [capitals in

original]. Here I was opening safes because keys were missing; I changed locks, made new keys, repaired typewriters, etc. On April 20, 1940, I became a supervisor [majster] as a mechanic and head of the repair shop at the MTS [Mechanical Tractor Station]. I repaired tractors on wheels and on tracks, agricultural machinery, as well as cars for various kolchozes and sovkhozes. In this mechanical center I was a brigade leader of the first brigade and a technical controller. At the same time I was a deputy to the city soviet [gorsoviet] of the town of Jedwabne in Łomża County.³

Bardón was evidently a very good mechanic. But no professional qualifications would, by themselves, put him into all these positions under the Soviets. Clearly, he was also a trusted man.

And there is, finally, the *pièce de résistance*: an autobiographical revelation from one of the greatest evildoers on that day, the older Lau-
dański brother, Zygmunt. This is what he wrote in a petition addressed to "the Ministry of Justice at the Security Police Office in Warsaw [Do Ministerstwa Sprawiedliwości U.B.P. w Warszawie]" from his jail in Ostrowiec on July 4, 1949:

When our territory was incorporated into the BSSR [Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic] I was hiding at the time for about six months from the Soviet authorities. . . . While I was hiding from deportation, I did not join bands of outlaws that were forming at the time on our territory, but I sent a plea to Generalissimus Stalin, which was forwarded by Moscow's prosecutor's office, Puzhkinska Street 15, to the NKVD office in Jedwabne with an order to review. After I was questioned and investigated, it turned out that I had been unjustly punished, and in order to recover my losses I was allowed to come out of hiding, free of the threat of deportation. After observing my views, the NKVD in Jedwabne called me to join in work at liquidating anti-Soviet evil. [It looks as though Laudański might have been one of the penitents of NKVD colonel Misuriew.] At that time I made contact with the NKVD in Jedwabne (I do not state my pseudonym in writing). During my contact, in order to make my work more effective, my superiors ordered me (in order to avoid detection by reactionary elements) to take an anti-Soviet attitude, since I was already known by the authorities. When suddenly the Soviet-german [capital and lowercase letter in original] war broke out in

1941, the NKVD did not manage to destroy all its documents, and I was afraid and did not go out, and only surreptitiously did I establish [by sending his younger brother to work in the German gendarmerie right away:] that the most important documents were burned in the NKVD courtyard. . . . I feel wronged by the entire sentence, because my views are different from what is suspected, because when I was in contact with the NKVD, my life was permanently in danger. And now [i.e., after the war] I did not join any reactionary bands but left my hometown and started working in the gmina Cooperative of Peasant Self-Help, which was persecuted by reactionaries. By joining the Polish Workers' Party, I felt how my well-being improved in the Democratic spirit, and I believe that on shoulders like mine our workers' regime may safely rest [my emphasis]. I declare that only as a misunderstood man I ended up in jail, because if my opinion about friendship with the Soviet Union had been known, then reactionary bands, if not the Germans, would have destroyed me together with my family.⁴

We are struck at the first reading of this exposé by the unbending conformism of this

man. Apparently, he tried to anticipate what each successive carnivorous regime of this epoch might most desire of its subjects, and went to extremes in his zeal to please—first by becoming a secret NKVD collaborator, then by doing the Nazis' dirty work in killing the Jews, and finally by joining the Communist Party, the PPR. The French have a good expression to describe this mode of adaptation to changing circumstances, a race with destiny called *fuite en avant*.

But these scraps of biographies of four individuals who turned out to have been collaborators with the Soviet authorities before they became German collaborators (in addition to killing the Jews in the pogrom, two among the accused—Jerzy Ładański and Karol Bardoń—would later join the German gendarmerie) point to a more general phenomenon, I believe, than the mere individual trajectories of a few evil men. It is not just a question of character that plays itself out in this drama, but also the logic of incentives one encounters within the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. I shall comment on this issue in concluding remarks, for I see here interpretive possibilities of wartime and post-

war Polish history that have not yet been fully explored.

In the meantime, I want to conclude this close encounter with Jedwabne antiheroes with a *cri de coeur* of the youngest Laudański, Jerzy, who by all accounts was the worst murderer among the accused. He must have been a strapping youth, six feet tall, and full of energy. In the control-investigative files of the Stalinist secret police, where all defendants were characterized according to thirty-four different traits, under the rubric “speech” Laudański’s is described as “Loud, Clear, Polish.” Other fellow accused’s speech is mostly characterized as “Quiet.”⁵ In 1956, as the last of all the Łomża trial defendants still in prison, he sends out a plea. In a shameless display of moral idiocy, he asks, *Why do you keep me behind bars if I was not a German sympathizer but rather a true Polish patriot?*

Since I was raised in an area of intense struggles against the Jews, and during the war Germans mas-murdered Jews over there, also in other localities, why me, the youngest in the trial and raised [in Poland] during the Sanacja period [i.e., before the war], why should I be the only

one treated with full severity of the law? After all, since the school bench I was taught only in one direction, which means that during the occupation I was preoccupied only with matters related to my Nation and my Motherland. As a proof of it, I did not hesitate when there was need to give my strengths for the good of the Motherland during the occupation. I went underground and joined a conspiratorial organization by the name

Polish Association for Insurrection [Polski Związek Powstańczy, in its later incarnation, the Home Army, AK] to fight against the occupier in autumn of 1941 in Poreba, by the river Bug in Ostrów Mazowiecki County, and my activity there was to transport underground newspapers and other items. In May of 1942 the gestapo arrested me and I was imprisoned in Pawiak [the main prison in Warsaw] and then deported to concentration camps, Auschwitz, Gross-Rosen, Oranienburg, where I suffered for three years alongside others as a Pole and a political prisoner. And after the Red Army liberated us in 1945, I did not follow those who abandoned their devastated Motherland and preferred easy western life only to return later, but as spies or wreckers. Without a moment of hesitation I returned to the devastated Country, to my Nation, to whom I

offered my young, just barely twenty-year-old life, in the struggle against the occupier. The court, however, did not take under consideration my above proofs that I was in no way a supporter of the occupier, and certainly not like one the Security Office in Łomża made of me in the investigation on the basis of which I received such a long sentence. After returning [to Poland] I worked all the time in state institutions.⁶

In some perverse way this man was making a valid point, though. After all, he was sentenced under a paragraph that penalized not so much concrete deeds as the fact of collaboration with the Germans. And, of course, in his own mind he had not been collaborating with any occupiers. He was a regular guy, a good patriot acting in collaboration, at most, with his own neighbors. Jerzy Ładański was released on parole, the last among the condemned in this trial, on February 18, 1957.⁷

In Jedwabne ordinary Poles slaughtered the Jews, very much as ordinary Germans from the *Ordnungspolizei* Battalion no. 101 did in Jozefów, as documented in Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*. They were men of all ages and of different professions; entire

families on occasion, fathers and sons acting in concert; good citizens, one is tempted to say (if sarcasm were not out of place, given the hideousness of their deeds), who heeded the call of municipal authorities. And what the Jews saw, to their horror and, I dare say, incomprehension, were familiar faces. Not anonymous men in uniform, cogs in a war machine, agents carrying out orders, but their own neighbors, who chose to kill and were engaged in a bloody pogrom—willing executioners.

A

NACHRONISM

The massacre of Jedwabne Jews leaves a historian of modern Poland perplexed and groping for explanation. Nothing of the sort has been recorded or written about in scholarly literature. In a desperate effort to somehow domesticate these events, images from the distant past flood memory, giving the semblance (by virtue of familiarity) of making sense of what we have learned. Perhaps the mass murders in Radziłów and Jedwabne were an anachronism belonging to an entirely different epoch? One cannot shake the impression that by some evil magic peasant mobs stepped off the pages of Henryk Sienkiewicz's national saga of seventeenth-century wars,

Trilogi, onto the soil of Białystok voivodeship in the summer of 1941. Ever since Khmielnicki's peasant wars (which in Jewish mythologized memory are encoded by the terrifying word *Khurban*, catastrophe, a foreshadowing of the Shoah), Jews had suffered the destructive force inimical to everything different that lay in wait in the countryside of those lands, bursting into the open, occasionally, in paroxysms of violence. Evidently, *rzeź i rabacja* (slaughter and plunder) remained in the standing repertory of collective behavior in these parts and was played out every so often during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹

Where did this explosive potential come from? We must remember that in the background of anti-Jewish violence there always lurked a suspicion of ritual murder, a conviction that Jews use for the preparation of Passover matzoh the fresh blood of innocent Christian children. It was a deeply ingrained belief among many Polish Catholics, and not simply among residents of the boondocks. After all, rumors that Jews were engaging in these practices drew incensed crowds into the streets of Polish *cities* at a moment's notice even after the Second World War. This was

the mechanism that triggered the most infamous postwar pogroms, in Cracow in 1945 and in Kielce in 1946.² And nothing could frighten activists of Jewish Committees, or Jewish survivors after the war, more than a visit to their neighborhood from a concerned Christian parent looking around for a missing child!³

The Shoah has been portrayed in scholarly literature as a phenomenon rooted in modernity. We know very well that in order to kill millions of people, an efficient bureaucracy is necessary, along with a (relatively) advanced technology. But the murder of Jedwabne Jews reveals yet another, deeper, more archaic layer of this enterprise. I am referring not only to the motivations of the murderers—after all, Jedwabne residents and peasants from Łomża County could not yet have managed to soak up the vicious anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda, even if they had been willing and ready—but also to primitive, ancient methods and murder weapons: stones, wooden clubs, iron bars, fire, and water; as well as the absence of organization. It is clear, from what happened in Jedwabne, that we must approach the Holocaust as a heterogeneous phenomenon. On the one

hand, we have to be able to account for it as a system, which functioned according to a pre-conceived (though constantly evolving) plan. But, simultaneously, we must also be able to see it as a mosaic composed of discrete episodes, improvised by local decision-makers, and hinging on unforced behavior, rooted in God-knows-what motivations, of all those who were near the murder scene at the time. This makes all the difference in terms of assessing responsibility for the killings, as well as calculating the odds for survival that confronted the Jews.

WHAT DO PEOPLE REMEMBER?

One of the premier authors of modern Hebrew literature, Aharon Appelfeld, returned in 1996 to his native village near Czernovitz, where he had spent the first eight and a half years of his life, until June 1941. "What does a child of eight and a half remember? Almost nothing. But, miraculously, that 'almost nothing' has nourished me for years. Not a day passes when I'm not at home. In my adopted country of Israel, I have written thirty books that draw directly or indirectly upon the village of my childhood, whose name is found only on ordinance maps. That 'almost nothing' is the well from which I draw and draw, and it seems that there is no end to its waters."

And so when he returned fifty years later, the beauty and odd familiarity of the landscape once again evoked a sense of well-being and careless joy. "Who could imagine that in this village, on a Saturday, our Sabbath, sixty-two souls, most of them women and children, would fall prey to pitchforks and kitchen knives, and I, because I was in a back room, would manage to escape to the cornfields and hide?"¹

Appelfeld had come to the village with his wife and a film crew that was recording his return to the native village. A group of local people gathered to look the strangers over; when Appelfeld asked about the burial site of the Jews who were murdered during the war, it seemed that no one could give him an answer. But after a time it emerged that he had lived there as a child, and then someone who had gone to school with him recognized him. Eventually "a tall peasant came up, and, as if in an old ceremony, the village people explained to him what I wanted to know. He raised his arm and pointed: it was over there, on a hill. There was silence, then an outpouring of speech, which I could not understand."

Appelfeld continues, "It turned out that what the people of the village had tried to conceal from me was well known, even to the children. I asked several little children, who were standing near the fence and looking at us, where the Jews' graves were. Right away, they raised their hands and pointed." And they all went toward that hill, not speaking much along the way, until "finally one of them said, 'Here is the grave.' He pointed at an uncultivated field. 'Are you sure?' I asked. 'I buried them,' the peasant replied. He added, 'I was sixteen.'"²

Just as Appelfeld found his mother's grave half a century after her violent death in his native village, another writer, Henryk Grynberg in Poland, found the skeleton of his father, killed in the spring of 1944, near the place where the family had hidden at the time. Local villagers knew very well who had murdered Grynberg, when and for what reason, as well as where the body was buried. Polish film audiences could see the whole story unfold as a handheld camera followed Grynberg's quest for his father's grave in the prizewinning documentary by Paweł Łoziński called *The Place*

of Birth. And of course the entire population of Jedwabne knows very well what took place in their town on July 10, 1941.

That is why I believe that detailed recollections of this epoch are preserved in every town and village where Jews were murdered. And this is as it should be—for those who witnessed such a horrible tragedy would be callous indeed if they had all but forgotten what happened. But this is also a curse—for not infrequently the local population did not merely witness the murder of their Jewish neighbors but were actively involved in the killing. How can we otherwise explain why after the war the Gentiles who had offered assistance to Jews at the risk of their own lives—Gentiles who were later recognized by the Yad Vashem authority as the Righteous Amongst Nations—as a rule feared revealing before their neighbors that they had hidden Jews under the German occupation?³

That they had ample reasons to be afraid we can learn from the people whose lives are forever connected to the history of Jedwabne Jews. I will not recount the full story of how the Wyrzykowski family managed to save

Wasersztajn and six other Jews during the occupation. But what happened to them *after* the liberation does pertain to our topic.

I, Aleksander Wyrzykowski, together with my wife Antonia, we wanted to make the following deposition. When the Red Army came, these martyrs were free; we dressed them up as best we could. The first one went to his house, but his family had perished so he came to eat with us. The rest went to their places. One Sunday I noticed that guerrillas⁴ were coming and they said, We'll come over today and get rid of the Jew, and the other said that they would kill everybody one night. From this time on the Jew slept in the field in a dugout for potatoes; I gave him a pillow and my coat. I went to warn the others as well. They started to hide. The two girls who were their fiancées the guerrillas had nothing against, and those bandits told them not to say a word to their fiancées that they came. This same night they came to us to get the Jew; they said to give him away, that they would kill him and would no longer bother us. My wife replied that I had gone to visit my sister, and that the Jew had gone to Łomża and hadn't come back. Then they started to beat her so that she didn't have a white patch

on her body, only black skin everywhere. They took what good things they found in the house and told her to drive them back. My wife took them in a horse cart near to Jedwabne. When she returned, the Jew came out of the hiding place and saw how she was beaten up. After a certain time another Jew, Janek Kubrzański, came. We talked afterward and decided to run away from this place. We took residence in Łomża. My wife left a little child with her parents. From Łomża we moved to Białystok, because we feared for our lives. . . . In 1946 we moved to Bielsk Podlaski. But after a few years this was found out, and we had to leave Bielsk Podlaski.

So the stigma of having helped Jews during the occupation stuck to the Wyrzykowski family for good, and it followed them from place to place and, as it turned out, also from generation to generation.⁵ Antonia Wyrzykowska in the end escaped across the ocean and settled in Chicago. The son of Antonia Wyrzykowska's nephew, who remained near Jedwabne, was called "a Jew" whenever his playmates got angry.

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Even though the Nazi-conceived project of the eradication of world Jewry will remain, at its core, a mystery, we know a lot about various mechanisms of the “final solution.” And one of the things we do know is that the *Einsatzgruppen*, German police detachments, and various functionaries who implemented the “final solution” did not compel the local population to participate directly in the murder of Jews. Bloody pogroms were tolerated, sometimes even invited, especially after the opening of the Russo-German war—a special directive was issued to this effect by the head of the Main Reich Security Office, Reinhardt Heydrich.¹ A lot of prohibitions concerning the

Jews were issued as well. In occupied Poland, for example, people could not, under penalty of death, offer assistance to Jews hiding outside of the German-designated ghettos. Though there were sadistic individuals who, particularly in camps, might force prisoners to kill each other, in general nobody was forced to kill the Jews. In other words, *the so-called local population involved in killings of Jews did so of its own free will.*

And if in collective Jewish memory this phenomenon is ingrained—that local Polish people killed the Jews because they wanted to, not because they had to—then Jews will hold them to be particularly responsible for what they have done. A murderer in uniform remains a state functionary acting under orders, and he might even be presumed to have mental reservations about what he has been ordered to do. Not so a civilian, killing another human being of his own free will—such an evildoer is unequivocally but a murderer.

Poles hurt the Jews in numerous interactions throughout the war. And it is not exclusively killings that are stressed in people’s recollections from the period. One might recall, for illustration, a few women described in an

autobiographical fragment, "A Quarter-Hour Passed in a Pastry Shop," from a powerful memoir by Michał Głowiński, today one of the foremost literary critics in Poland. He was a little boy at the time of the German occupation. On this occasion an aunt had left him alone for fifteen minutes in a little Warsaw café; after sitting him down at a table with a pastry, she went out to make a few telephone calls. As soon as she left the premises, the young Jewish boy became an object of scrutiny and questioning by a flock of women who could just as well have left him in peace.² Between this episode and the Jedwabne murders one can inscribe an entire range of Polish-Jewish encounters that, in the midst of all their situational variety, had one feature in common: they all carried potentially deadly consequences for the Jews.

When reflecting about this epoch, we must not assign collective responsibility. We must be clearheaded enough to remember that for each killing only a specific murderer or group of murderers is responsible. But we nevertheless might be compelled to investigate what makes a nation (as in "the Germans") capable of carrying out such deeds. Or

can atrocious deeds simply be bracketed off and forgotten? Can we arbitrarily select from a national heritage what we like, and proclaim it as patrimony to the exclusion of everything else? Or just the opposite: if people are indeed bonded together by authentic spiritual affinity—I have in mind a kind of national pride rooted in common historical experiences of many generations—are they not somehow responsible also for horrible deeds perpetrated by members of such an "imagined community"? Can a young German reflecting today on the meaning of his identity as a German simply ignore twelve years (1933–1945) of his country's and his ancestors' history?

And even if selectivity in the process of forging national identity is unavoidable (one cannot write "everything" into one's own self-image, if only because nobody knows "everything"; and, in any case, even with the best intentions it would be next to impossible to have a global recall), the boundaries of a collective identity so constructed—in order to remain *authentic*—would have to remain open forever. Anyone must be at any time empowered to challenge such a construct by asking how some episode, or series of episodes, or an

epoch from ancestral history, fits into the proposed self-image of a nation.

Usually the canon of collective identity is assembled from deeds that are somehow special, striking, or remarkable. It is made up, in other words, of actions that depart from routine, that are unusual. And even though it is only a Fryderyk, a Jan, or a Mikołaj who has actually performed such deeds, as constitutive components of the canon they also belong to the collective "us." Hence Polish music, most deservedly, is proud of "our" Chopin; Polish science of "our" Copernicus; and Poland thinks of itself as a "bastion of Christianity [*przedmurze chrześcijaństwa*]" in no small part because King Jan Sobieski defeated the Turks in an important battle near Vienna. For this reason we are entitled to ask whether deeds committed by the likes of Ładański and Karolak—since they were so striking and unusual—engage Polish collective identity as well.

My question is, of course, rhetorical, because we understand very well that such a mass murder affects all in a community across time. It is enough to recall a vocal public discussion that was triggered by an article published in

the largest Polish daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, by Michał Cichy, in which he discussed the murder of several Jews in Warsaw during the Warsaw Uprising, in the summer of 1944, committed by a Polish Home Army detachment.³ The spirited public reaction evidenced by the many letters sent to the editors after publication manifests how strongly such odious behavior by a group of demoralized young men engages Poles half a century later. What of the Jedwabne massacre, then, which dwarfs anything we previously imagined concerning the criminal aspect of Polish-Jewish relations during the war?

NEW APPROACH TO SOURCES

The mass murder of Jedwabne Jews in the summer of 1941 opens up historiography of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War. Sedatives that were administered in connection with this subject by historians and journalists for over fifty years have to be put aside. It is simply not true that Jews were murdered in Poland during the war solely by the Germans, occasionally assisted in the execution of their gruesome task by some auxiliary police formations composed primarily of Latvians, Ukrainians, or some other “Kalmuks,” not to mention the proverbial “fall guys” whom everybody castigated because it was so easy not to take responsibility for what

they had done—the so-called *szmalcowiks*, extortionists who made a profession of blackmailing Jews trying to pass and survive in hiding. By singling them out as culprits, historians and others have found it easy to bring closure to the matter by saying that there is “scum” in every society, that these were a few “socially marginal” individuals, and that they were dealt with by underground courts anyway.¹

After Jedwabne the issue of Polish-Jewish relations during the war can no longer be put to rest with such ready-made formulas. Indeed, we have to rethink not only wartime but also postwar Polish history, as well as reevaluate certain important interpretive themes widely accepted as explanations accounting for outcomes, attitudes, and institutions of those years.

To begin with, I suggest that we should modify our approach to sources for this period. When considering survivors’ testimonies, we would be well advised to change the starting premise in appraisal of their evidentiary contribution from a priori critical to in principle affirmative. By accepting what we read in a particular account as fact *until we find*

persuasive arguments to the contrary, we would avoid more mistakes than we are likely to commit by adopting the opposite approach, which calls for cautious skepticism toward any testimony until an independent confirmation of its content has been found. The greater the catastrophe the fewer the survivors. We must be capable of listening to lonely voices reaching us from the abyss, as did Wąsersztajn's testimony before the memorial book of Jedwabne Jews was published, or such as still remains, as best I can tell, Finkelsztajn's testimony about the destruction of the Jewish community in Radziłów.

I make the point, to some extent, on the basis of my own experience. It took me four years, as I stated at the beginning of this volume, to understand what Wąsersztajn was communicating in his deposition. But the same conclusion—that we ought to accept as true Jewish testimonies about atrocities committed by the local population until they are proven false—suggests itself as we consider the general absence in Polish historiography of any studies about the involvement of the ethnically Polish population in the destruction of Polish Jewry. It is a subject of fundamental

importance that has been extremely well documented. In the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw alone one can find over seven thousand depositions collected from the survivors of the Holocaust immediately after the war, which provide voluminous evidence of collusion by the Poles in the destruction of their Jewish neighbors. But quite often—as with Wąsersztajn's and Finkelsztajn's testimony—these come from the only surviving witnesses, who have utterly “incredible” stories to tell. All I am arguing for is the suspension of our incredulity.

But, in the last analysis, it is not our professional inadequacy (as a community of historians of this period) that calls most compellingly for revision in the approach to sources. This methodological imperative follows from the very immanent character of all evidence about the destruction of Polish Jewry that we are ever likely to come across.

All that we know about the Holocaust—the virtue of the fact that it has been told—is not a representative sample of the Jewish fate suffered under Nazi rule. It is all skewed evidence, biased in one direction: these are all stories with a happy ending. They have all

been produced by a few who were lucky enough to survive. Even statements from witnesses who have not survived—statements that have been interrupted by the sudden death of their authors, who therefore left only fragments of what they wanted to say—belong to this category. For what has reached us was written only while the authors were still alive. About the “heart of darkness” that was also the very essence of their experience, about their last betrayal, about the Calvary of 90 percent of the prewar Polish Jewry—we will never know. And that is why we must take literally all fragments of information at our disposal, fully aware that what actually happened to the Jewish community during the Holocaust can only be more tragic than the existing representation of events based on surviving evidence.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE SIMULTANEOUSLY A VICTIM AND A VICTIMIZER?

War is a myth-creating experience in the life of every society. But in Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe it is continuously a source of vivid, only too often lethal, legitimization narratives. The memory, indeed the symbolism, of collective, national martyrology during the Second World War is paramount for the self-understanding of Polish society in the twentieth century.¹ Every town has its sacred sites commemorating victims of terror; every family its horror stories of executions, imprisonment, and deportation. How can we fit the unvarnished history of Polish-Jewish relations during the war into this picture? After all, Jed-

wabne—though perhaps one of the most excessive (*the* most excessive, it must be hoped) of all murderous assaults by Poles against the Jews—was not an isolated episode. And it prompts us to ask a question: can one, as a group with a distinctive collective identity, be at the same time a victim and a perpetrator? Is it possible to suffer and inflict suffering at the same time?

In the postmodern world the answer to such questions is very simple—of course it is possible. Furthermore, such an answer has already been given with reference to collective experiences during the Second World War. When the Allies finally occupied Germany and “discovered” concentration camps, they made an effort to confront every German with knowledge of Nazi crimes as part of their denazification campaign. The response of German public opinion was rather unexpected: *Armes Deutschland*, “Poor Germany.”² This was how news of German crimes perpetrated during the war resonated within German society: the world will hate us for what the Nazis have done. It was apparently easy for the Germans to take on a sense of victimization since it alleviated, in a manner of speaking, the bur-

den of responsibility for the war and suffering inflicted on countless victims.

But such an overlay of contradictory narratives usually generates conflict and debate. We might for illustration take note of a projected public controversy sparked in Germany by a photographic exhibition about the German army’s role in genocide (*Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944*), mounted by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. The regular army, where any German male of draft age might have served, was not supposed to have been involved in the atrocities committed against the Jews (according to the prevailing consensus). Of course German historians knew that the army had participated in atrocities, and wrote accordingly. Nevertheless, the wider public was not ready to accept evidence that ran counter to this deeply held conviction. Will acceptance of responsibility for odious deeds perpetrated during World War II—on top of a deeply ingrained, and well-deserved, sense of victimization suffered at the time—come easily and naturally to the Polish public?

Jews who found themselves in DP camps in Germany after the war—as we know, some

200,000 Jews fled from Poland after 1945, mostly to these camps—used to say that Germans would never forgive the Jews for what they had done to them. One wonders whether the same formula would not be a better explanation of postwar Polish antisemitism than the usually invoked Jewish names of prominent Communist leaders from the Stalinist era (typically Berman and Minc),³ whose nefarious deeds supposedly induced such general negative attitudes toward the Jews among the Polish public.

Antipathy toward the Jews in Poland after the war was widespread and full of aggression, and one would be hard-pressed to demonstrate that it resulted from a cool and detached analysis of the postwar political situation prevailing in the country. And one need not base this assessment on conversations reported by some oversensitive memoirist, or on a subjective reaction to someone's glance, or a casual remark. To prove the point, let us consider a social phenomenon that engaged masses of people in a sustained, risky, and undoubtedly spontaneous manifestation of their deeply held beliefs: workers' strikes.

In a very well researched study titled *Workers' Strikes in Poland in the Years 1945–1948* published in 1999⁴—that is, at a time when a diligent scholar had full access to all the pertinent source materials—a young historian, Łukasz Kamiński, meticulously recorded all the waves of workers' protests that swept through the country during those postwar years. And a lot was happening in Poland at the time. Communist authorities were successively emasculating autonomous social and political institutions, including labor unions and mass political parties with a long tradition—such as the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), then under the leadership of Zygmunt Żuławski, and the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), led at the time by Stanisław Mikołajczyk, Stanisław Mierzwa, and Stefan Korboński. By 1948 the *Gleichschaltung* of autonomous institutions in Poland was pretty much completed. They were either absorbed into Communist-sponsored organizations or banned, their leaders arrested, exiled, or silenced. And it turns out that during this entire period the working class put down its tools and went on strike for reasons other than purely bread-and-butter issues

only once: in order to protest the publication in newspapers around the country of its own alleged denunciations of the pogrom in Kielce, where forty-two Jews had been killed by a Polish mob on July 4, 1946.⁵

This is difficult to understand at first, so let me simply quote from Kamiński's study:

On July 10 [1946] meetings were called in several Łódź factories in order to condemn the perpetrators of the Kielce pogrom. People were reluctant to sign condemnatory statements. Nevertheless such statements were published the next day in the newspapers. This resulted in protest strikes. The first ones to go on strike were workers from the Łódź Thread Factory, and from factories Scheibler and Grobman, who were joined by workers from Buble, Zimmermann, Warta, Tempo Rasik, Hofrichter, Gampe and Albrecht, Gutman, Dietzel, Radziejewski, Weynach, Kinnerman, Wólczanka, and from two sawing workshops. At the beginning strikers demanded that false information be corrected [about factory workers' allegedly signing those protests]; later a demand to release people condemned [in the summary trial fourteen people were sentenced to death] was added. Protesters were

very agitated; violence was used against those who called for resuming work. . . . This kind of workers' reaction was not atypical for the rest of the country. Crews in many factories refused to vote resolutions condemning perpetrators of the pogrom. In Lublin during a mass meeting of 1,500 railwaymen in this matter people were screaming, "Down with the Jews," "Shame, they came to defend the Jews," "Bierut [the President of Poland at the time] will not dare to sentence them to death," "Włcho and Lwów have to be ours."⁶

There were many occasions during these years to protest against the creeping communist takeover of Poland. But, obviously, this was not the underlying motivation for the wave of strikes following the Kielce pogrom. And while these strikes make no sense as protest against some imaginary "Judeo-commune," they are perfectly understandable as a sign of frustration that one could no longer properly defend innocent Polish Christian children threatened by the murderous designs of the Jews. This was, literally, the gist of complaints overheard by a Jewish woman injured in the Cracow pogrom of August 1945, as she was being taken to a hospital emergency room:

In the ambulance I heard comments of the escorting soldier and the nurse who spoke about us as Jewish scum, whom they have to save, and that they shouldn't be doing this because we murdered children, that all of us should be shot. We were taken to the hospital of St. Lazarus at Kopernika street. I was first taken to the operating room.

After the operation a soldier appeared, who said that he will take everybody to jail after the operations. He beat up one of the wounded Jews waiting for an operation. He held us under a cocked gun and did not allow us to take a drink of water. A moment later two railroad-men appeared and one said "it's a scandal that a Pole does not have the civil courage to hit a defenseless person" and he hit a wounded Jew. One of the hospital inmates hit me with a crutch. Women, including nurses, stood behind the doors threatening us that they are only waiting for the operation to be over in order to rip us apart.⁷

In other words, postwar antisemitism was widespread and predated any Communist attempts to take power in Poland, because it was firmly rooted in medieval prejudice about ritual murder. It was also embedded in the experience of war.

Why did the Wyrzykowski family have to flee from its farm? "Hershek, you're still alive?"—an incredulous sentence and a contemptuous look greeted Hershel Piekarz when he emerged from his hiding place in the woods.⁸ Once again, such reactions were not derived from belief in some mythical "Judeo-commune" or anger over the Soviet-assisted Communist takeover of Poland abetted by the Jews. Hershel Piekarz, like other token Jews who survived the war, and the Wyrzykowski family, like other heroic Poles who had hidden Jews during the war at great peril and then, after the war, continued to hide this fact from their neighbors—all of them were not hated or feared as crypto-communists but rather as embarrassing witnesses to crimes that had been committed against the Jews. They could also point to the illicit material benefits that many continued to enjoy as a result of these crimes. Their existence was a reproach, calling forth pangs of conscience, as well as a potential threat.

C O L L A B O R A T I O N

And what about a classic wartime theme that, as we know, has no place in Polish historiography of the period—collaboration?¹ After all, when Hitler launched his *Blitzkrieg* against the USSR in June 1941, German soldiers were received by the local population of former Polish territories (which were incorporated in 1939 into the Soviet Union) as an army of liberators! The commander of the underground Polish Home Army (AK), General Grot-Rowecki, sent a dispatch to London on July 8, 1941, informing the Polish government in exile about the friendly reception of the German army throughout the so-called *Kresy Wschodnie* (i.e., Eastern Borderlands).² “When

the Germans attacked the Soviet army,” writes a peasant from Biłystok voivodeship, “the Polish population from these territories rather gladly received the Germans, not realizing that this was the most serious enemy of Polishness. In various little towns Germans were received with flowers, etc.... The sister of one of the inhabitants returned from Biłystok at that time and told about the enthusiastic reception that the Germans received from the Polish population of the city.” Or as in another characteristic recollection, also from the Biłystok area: “People started talking about the pending war between Germans and Russkies, which people very much desired, hoping that the Germans would chase away the Russkies and we would remain in place and the Russkies would not manage to deport all of us.... Finally in June 1941 a war broke out between Germans and Russkies, and a few days later Russkians gave in. Great joy overcame people who were hiding from the Russkies as they were no longer afraid that they would be deported to Russia, and everybody who met a friend or a relative whom they had not seen for some time, their first words of greeting were: They will no longer deport us. It so happened

that a priest from a neighboring parish was passing through our village the day after the Russkies moved out, and he called to everyone he saw: They won't deport us anymore. It is probable that Russians made a mistake by massively deporting Poles to Russia, and for this action local people really grew to hate the Russians."³

Indeed, over half of the prewar territory of the Polish state had been liberated by June and July of 1941 from Bolshevik rule, and the local population—with the exception of Jews, of course—recognized the event by welcoming the entering Wehrmacht units with open arms. Local residents promptly established administrative bodies compliant with German will and joined in the *Vernichtungskrieg* directed against the "Jews and the Commissars."⁴ Ramotowski and his accomplices, after all, were put on trial because "they acted in a manner that fostered the interests of the German state," and so forth.

We come here upon a fascinating subject for a social psychologist—an overlay in collective memory of two episodes from this period. Two conquests of this territory, by the Red Army in 1939 and the Wehrmacht in 1941,

seem grafted upon each other in preserved narratives. To put it simply, enthusiastic Jewish response to entering Red Army units was not a widespread phenomenon at all, and it is impossible to identify some innate, unique characteristics of Jewish collaboration with the Soviets during the period 1939–1941.⁵ On the other hand, it is manifest that the local non-Jewish population enthusiastically greeted entering Wehrmacht units in 1941 and broadly engaged in collaboration with the Germans, up to and including participation in the exterminatory war against the Jews.

Thus it appears that the local non-Jewish population projected its own attitude toward the Germans in 1941 (this story remains a complete taboo and has never been studied in Polish historiography) onto an entrenched narrative about how the Jews allegedly behaved vis-à-vis the Soviets in 1939. The testimony by Finkelsztajn concerning how Radziłów's local Polish population received the Germans reads like a mirror image of widely circulating stories about Galician Jews receiving the Bolsheviks in 1939.

And what about the episode of the Soviets' recruiting secret police collaborators among

Polish underground activists, reported by Colonel Misiuriew and confirmed by the (auto)biography of *Laudański*? Could this be, perhaps, a particular instance of a more general phenomenon characteristic of this epoch? Aren't people compromised by collaboration with a repressive regime predestined, so to speak, to become collaborators of the next repressive regime that gains power over the same area? Such individuals would be inclined to demonstrate enthusiasm for new rulers and their policies right from the beginning, in order to accumulate sufficient credit in advance, to balance their liabilities in case their roles under a previous regime become known. Alternatively, they will collaborate because they are such an obvious and easy target for blackmail once their past record becomes known to new rulers. Nazism, let us repeat, following the German political philosopher *Eric Voegelin*, is a regime that taps into the evil instincts of human beings—not only because it elevates “rabble” into positions of power, but also because of “the simple man, who is a decent man as long as the society as a whole is in order but who then goes wild,

without knowing what he is doing, when disorder arises somewhere and the society is no longer holding together.”⁶

The Second World War, or, to be more precise, the Soviet and the German occupations that it brought, exposed provincial Poland for the first time to the *modus operandi* of totalitarian regimes. And it is not surprising that a society so afflicted did not stand up particularly well to the challenge, and that profound demoralization resulted from both collective experiences. To grasp this state of affairs, we need not even reach for subtle diagnosis by sophisticated intellectuals, such as the unsurpassed study of the impact of war on Polish society by literary scholar *Kazimierz Wyka*, for example.⁷ It is enough to recall the plague of wartime banditry and alcoholism attested to by virtually any contemporaneous source; for illustration take a look, once again, at the collection of peasant memoirs about their wartime experiences that were submitted in 1948 to a public “contest” organized by the publishing house *Czytelnik* in Poland. *Krystyna Kersten* and *Tomasz Szarota* published submissions of some fifteen hundred

authors in four thick volumes entitled *Polish Countryside, 1939–1948*.⁸

For me the most shattering exemplar of moral disintegration during those years, illustrating the breakdown of cultural taboos that prohibit the murder of innocent human beings, can be found in a story by a peasant woman from a hamlet near Wadowice—a story in which nobody gets killed, which must be read also as a hymn to love and selfless sacrifice. Karolcia Sapetowa, “a former maid,” left this testimony with the staff of the Jewish Historical Commission, and it is now deposited at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw:

Our family was composed of three children and their parents. The youngest, Sammy Hochbeiser, a little girl, Sally, and the oldest one, Izzy. During the first year of the war the father was killed. When all the Jews were concentrated in the ghetto, we separated. Every day I went to the ghetto bringing along what I could, because I missed the children very much; I considered them as mine. When things were particularly bad in the ghetto, the children came over to my place and stayed with me until things quieted down.

They felt at home at my place. In 1943 in March the ghetto was liquidated. The youngest boy, by a coincidence, was at my place on that day. I went to the gate of the ghetto, which was surrounded by SS men and Ukrainians [auxiliary German police formations made up of former citizens of the USSR, sometimes referred to in shorthand by Poles as “Ukrainians”] on all sides. People were running around like mad. Mothers with children crowded helplessly near the gate. Suddenly I saw the mother with Sally and Izzy. The mother saw me as well, and she whispered into the little girl’s ear—“Go to Karolcia.” Sally without hesitation squeezed like a little mouse between the tall boots of the Ukrainians, who miraculously did not notice her. With her hands helplessly extended she ran toward me. Stiff with fear I went with Sally and an aunt toward my village, Witanowice, near Wadowice. The mother and Izzy were resettled, and they have not been heard from since. Life was very difficult, and one must believe that only a miracle saved these children.

At the beginning the children would go out of the house, but when relationships got more tense, I had to hide them inside. But even this did not

help. Local people knew that I was hiding Jewish children, and threats and difficulties began from all directions—that the children should be handed over to the gestapo, that the whole village might be burned in reprisals, or murdered, etc. The village head was on my side, and this often gave me peace of mind. People who were more aggressive and insistent I appeased with an occasional gift, or paid them off.

But this did not last long. SS men were always looking around, and again protests started until a certain day they told me that we had to remove the children from this world, and they put together a plan to take the children to the barn and there, when they fell asleep, to chop their heads off with an ax.

I was walking around like mad. My elderly father completely stiffened. What to do? What am I to do? The poor miserable children knew about everything, and before going to sleep, they begged us: "Karolciu, don't kill us yet today. Not yet today." I felt that I was getting numb, and I decided that I would not give up the children at any price.

I got a brilliant idea. I put the children on a cart, and I told everybody that I was taking them out to drown them. I rode around the entire vil-

lage, and everybody saw me and they believed, and when the night came I returned with the children....⁹

The story has a happy ending: the children survived, and Sapetowa declares with deep emotion that she will follow them anywhere because she loves them more than anything in the world. And we are left with a frightening realization that the population of a little village near Cracow sighed with relief only after its inhabitants were persuaded that one of their neighbors had murdered two small Jewish children.

How wartime demoralization played itself out among the Polish peasants, insofar as their attitude toward the Jews was concerned, has been described with unparalleled eloquence by one of the most important memoirists of this period, Dr. Zygmunt Klukowski, director of the county hospital in the village of Szczepreszyn, near Zamość. After all the Szczepreszyn Jews had been murdered, a process that Klukowski chronicled in devastating detail in his *Dziennik z lat okupacji zamojszczyzny* (Diary from the Years of Occupation of the Zamość Region), he writes, in despair,

the following entry on November 26, 1942: "Peasants afraid of reprisals catch Jews in hamlets and bring them to town or sometimes kill them on the spot. In general some terrible demoralization has taken hold of people with respect to Jews. A psychosis took hold of them and they emulate the Germans in that they don't see a human being in Jews, only some pernicious animal, which has to be destroyed by all means, like dogs sick with rabies, or rats."¹⁰

And thus by partaking in the persecution of Jews during the summer of 1941, an inhabitant of these territories could simultaneously endear himself to the new rulers, derive material benefits from his actions (it stands to reason that active pogrom participants had first pick in the division of leftover Jewish property), and go along with local peasants' traditional animosity toward the Jews. If we add to this mix encouragement by the Nazis and an easily whipped-up sense that one was settling scores with the "Judeo-commune" for indignities suffered under the Soviet occupation—then who could resist such a potent, devilish mixture?¹¹ Of course, indispensable preconditions were prior brutalization of interpersonal

relations, demoralization, and a general license to use violence. But these were exactly the methods employed and mechanisms put in place by both occupiers. It is not difficult to imagine that among the most active participants in the Jedwabne pogrom were several more secret collaborators of the NKVD (who were mentioned in a memorandum from Colonel Misiurew to Secretary Popov), in addition to Laudanski, who conveniently told us in his autobiography that he had spied for the Soviets prior to killing the Jews for the Germans.

SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR STALINISM

But time did not come to a halt in 1941. And if we recognize that the mechanism I have just described is psychologically and sociologically plausible, then we are led to an interesting hypothesis about the coming to power and establishment of Communist rule in Poland in the years 1945–1948. In light of what has been said here so far, I would venture a proposition that in the process of Communist takeover in Poland after the war, the natural allies of the Communist Party, on the local level, were people who had been compromised during the German occupation.

We know, of course, that adherence to Communism was a very authentic commit-

ment for a considerable number of people; and many supported the Communist Party before and after the war because they were true believers, and not because they were conformists, or because the Red Army was garrisoned across the country. But in addition to drawing from such a principled and idealistic pool of supporters, twentieth-century totalitarianisms always used manpower of a different sort. Among their most valuable operatives and confidants there were also people devoid of all principles. Many students of totalitarianism have made this point.¹

Why wouldn't Voegelin's "rabble," which did the Nazis' dirty work in occupied Poland, reappear as the backbone of the Stalinist apparatus of power five years later? I have in mind the outer layer surrounding the core of stalwart Communists who, after all, were few and far between in Poland, as we know. In the name of what dearly held principles would they refuse to serve a new master? Why would they give up privileges that go with partaking in the local apparatus of power (read—of terror)? Why would they go to jail rather than to a police academy? Didn't Laudański have people of this ilk in mind when he wrote, "I

believe that on shoulders like mine our workers' regime may rest?"

One may also reflect in this light about the process of the imposition of communist rule from the vantage point of society rather than that of the apparatus of power. From this point of view, I would propose that communities where Jews had been murdered by local inhabitants during the war were especially vulnerable to sovietization. If social atomization is a prerequisite for the effective establishment and consolidation of communist monopoly of power in society, then the only effective opposition against a communist takeover may come from social milieus that are capable of generating solidarity. The question, then, may be put in simple terms: Can a local community that has just been involved in the murder of its own neighbors generate such a response to a hostile takeover? How can anyone trust people who have murdered, or knowingly denounced to their murderers, other human beings? Furthermore, if we have acted as instruments of violence, in the name of what principles can we oppose the use of violence turned against us by somebody else?

The issue can best be taken up as a factual question, to be resolved by empirical research. But at this stage it suggests a very intriguing hypothesis, which inverts a well-established cliché about this period by positing that *antisemites rather than Jews were instrumental in establishing the Communist regime in Poland after the war*. After all, in numerous districts, counties, little towns, and cities of provincial Poland there were no more Jews after the war, because the few who survived fled as soon as they could.² But in the establishment of the "people's Poland" somebody had to take the business in hand throughout the country. So *kto kogo*, who was taking in hand whom, as Vladimir Ilich Lenin asked nearly a hundred years ago? If only because of the ideological evolution of the communist regime in Poland—which culminated in an outburst of official antisemitism in March 1968³—I would not outright dismiss a proposition that it was indigenous lumpenproletariat rather than Jews who served as the social backbone of Stalinism in Poland.

FOR A NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY

This so-called question of Polish-Jewish relations during the war is like a loose thread in the historiography of this period. If we grasp and pull it, the entire intricately woven tapestry comes undone. It seems to me that antisemitism polluted whole patches of twentieth-century Polish history and turned them into forbidden subjects, calling forth stylized interpretations whose role was to cover, like a fig leaf, what had really happened.

But the history of a society can be conceived as a collective biography. And just as in a biography—which is also composed of discrete episodes—everything in the history of a society is in rapport with everything else. And

if at some point in this collective biography a big lie is situated, then everything that comes afterward will be devoid of authenticity and laced with fear of discovery. And instead of living their own lives, members of such a community will be suspiciously glancing over their shoulders, trying to guess what others think about what they are doing. They will keep diverting attention from shameful episodes buried in the past and go on “defending Poland’s good name,” no matter what. They will take all setbacks and difficulties to be a consequence of deliberate enemy conspiracies. Poland is not an exception in this respect among European countries. And like several other nations, in order to reclaim its own past, Poland will have to tell its past to itself anew.

An appropriate memento is to be found—where else?—in Jedwabne. Inscriptions were engraved there on two stone monuments commemorating the time of war. One of them simply propagates a lie by stating that 1,600 Jedwabne Jews were killed by the Nazis. The other, which was erected in post-1989 Poland, is more revealing. It reads, “To the memory of about 180 people including 2 priests who were murdered in the territory of Jedwabne district

in the years 1939–1956 by the NKWD, the Nazis, and the secret police [UB].” Signed, “society [*społeczeństwo*]”. And thus it either suggests that there were no Jews in Jedwabne at all, or else offers an unwitting admission of the crime. For, indeed, the 1,600 Jedwabne Jews were killed neither by the NKVD, nor by the Nazis, nor by the Stalinist secret police. Instead, as we now know beyond reasonable doubt, and as Jedwabne citizens knew all along, it was their neighbors who killed them.

POSTSCRIPT

The Jedwabne issue broke into the mass media in Poland with the broadcasting of Agnieszka Arnold's documentary *Where Is My Older Brother Cain?*, including a brief segment of conversation with Śleszyński's daughter in April 2000, and brilliant investigative reporting by Andrzej Kaczyński for the daily newspaper *Kwiecej* in May. His first article, “Całopalenie,” devoted exclusively to the Jedwabne massacre of Jews, was published on the front page of this respected daily with nationwide circulation of several hundred thousand copies on May 5, 2000. The follow-up article appeared two weeks later, on May 19. On the same day the Polish-language edition

of *Neighbors* was launched at Warsaw's International Book Fair.

As Kaczyński's reporting confirmed, Jedwabne residents knew well that Jedwabne Jews had been murdered by their neighbors during the war. This was, and remains, an uncontested issue. Furthermore, in conversations held in the ensuing weeks among Jedwabne's mayor, the town's citizens, and Catholic Church representatives both in Jedwabne and in Łomża, as well as representatives of the Jewish community from Warsaw who came to Jedwabne, a consensus began to emerge that the burial site of the Jewish victims will have to be properly identified and marked as a cemetery, that the monument and inscription on it will have to be changed to reflect the truth of the events, and that the whole story will have to be investigated and told in all its details. Indeed in August 2000 the newly established Institute of National Memory, which has the authority to issue indictments in cases of "crimes against the Polish nation," announced that it would open an investigation of the Jedwabne massacre, and that any perpetrators found still alive and lia-

ble to prosecution would be brought to trial. In conclusion, I believe that we have reached a threshold at which the new generation, raised in Poland with freedom of speech and political liberties, is ready to confront the unvarnished history of Polish-Jewish relations during the war.