
Anti-Semitism Without Jews

Jan T. Gross

**Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland
After Auschwitz**

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Reviewed by Alexandra Levy

Simple human compassion, in view of the terrible suffering of the murdered masses and the horror of the extermination camps; hatred of a common enemy; blood jointly shed on numerous occasions; rejection of the ideology propagated by the defeated occupier; a sense of justice, calling for some satisfaction for the survivors; satisfaction at least in the form of simple human goodwill; and the radical numerical decline of the Jewish population—these would be arguments sufficing, probably, to lead one to conclude that in postwar Poland anti-Semitism as a social phenomenon would be an impossibility.

~Stanislaw Ossowski

Despite the promise of “never again” following the horrors of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism

has continued to poison people’s minds. One would like to believe that Poland, which lost three million Jews in the Holocaust and was the site of most of the major extermination and concentration camps, would be cleansed of any anti-Jewish sentiment. Yet in the year following the Allies’ victory in World War II an estimated 500 to 1500 Jews were killed in anti-Jewish violence perpetrated by Poles. These Jews survived the Holocaust only to be brutally murdered by their countrymen. In *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz*, Jan T. Gross, a history professor at Princeton University and author of the highly controversial work *Neighbors*, which describes the massacre of Jews at Polish hands in Jedwabne during World War II, explores how and why Poland remained virulently anti-Semitic even after witnessing the horrors of genocide.

By World War II, Poland had

established itself as the center of the Jewish Diaspora, with more than three million Jews constituting ten percent of Poland's population. While Poland had been lauded as one of the most tolerant countries in Europe, it was certainly not free of the scourge of anti-Semitism. The seventeenth century Chmielnicki Rebellion saw Cossacks murder an estimated 50,000 to several hundred thousand Jews, and pogroms, though more common in Russia, also occurred on Polish soil. During the Holocaust, Poles often played an active part in collaborating with the Nazis, betraying the hiding places of Jews and sometimes actually precipitating violence against Jews (as at Jedwabne). "A well-known question asked by a small child was widely written about in the underground [Polish] press: 'Mommy, was it a human being that was killed or a Jew?'"

Gross relates how those Poles who did help Jews were afraid to be recognized after the war for their heroic actions, fearing that they would be ostracized by their countrymen. Miriam Hochberg-Mariańska, a Jew

who, thanks to her physical appearance, was able to pass as an ethnic Pole during the war, wrote afterwards, "I don't know if anyone living outside Poland will understand and accept the fact that saving a life of a defenseless child pursued by murderers can bring the rescuer shame or unpleasant consequences." Marcel Reich-Ranicki remembers that the Polish couple who hid him and his wife during the war begged him, "I implore you, don't tell anyone that you were with us. I know this nation. They would never forgive us for sheltering two Jews." The Holocaust did not lessen anti-Semitism in Poland; on the contrary, many Poles helped themselves to property belonging to Jews, both before and after the rightful owners were dead.

Pogroms are usually associated with tsarist Russia, and it is shocking to learn that pogroms happened in Poland *after* the Holocaust. The blood libel—the myth that Jews killed Christian children to use the blood in matzo—triggered many pogroms throughout history, from the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 in which more than

40 Jews were murdered to the Kraków pogrom of August 11, 1945, to the Kielce pogrom of July 4, 1946. Dozens of Jews were wounded in the Kraków pogrom, and several were killed. When the injured Jews reported to the hospital for treatment, they were met with brutal behavior:

A moment later two railroadmen 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... Women, including nurses, stood behind the doors threatening us, saying that they were only waiting for the surgery to be over in order to rip us apart.

Dozens of Jews were killed in the Kielce pogrom, and more were murdered on trains nearby—if a Pole suspected a person of being a Jew, he would literally throw the person off the train. If that did not kill the suspected Jew outright, the Pole (or more usually a small group) would finish the job. Non-Jewish Poles who “looked Jewish” were thus also targeted that day. The pogroms were perpetrated by common people as well as by members of the police and Security Service, and of course afterwards the blame for the

pogrom was laid squarely on the heads of the Jews themselves. Gross cites a report concerning the pogrom issued by a commission of priests set up by Kielce's bishop that states that “... one can say that Jews are responsible for the lion's share of the hatred that surrounds them.” This after the murder of the six million!

Over two million non-Jewish Poles perished in World War II. Poland suffered horribly under the yoke of the Nazis. Why then did Poles laugh and “[call] out cheerfully... ‘Come, look, how cutlets from Jews are frying’” as Jews burned to death during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising? Why did the Poles not help those who had also suffered? It is difficult when writing about this topic not to make generalizations, and certainly there were righteous Poles who aided Jews and were disgusted by the Nazis' anti-Semitism. But such righteous people were few in number, and after the war they faced scorn from their neighbors for having helped Jews. It was not just those who actively participated in the pogroms or who betrayed Jews to the Nazis who are to blame—it

was those who had no reaction, who passively allowed the murdering and the thieving and the taunts and the insults to continue.

Gross is no stranger to controversy. His 2002 *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* aroused a storm of debate with its claim that Poles, and not the Nazis (as had been previously assumed), massacred all but seven of the 1,600 Jews that lived in the town of Jedwabne in 1941. In *Fear*, Gross attempts to answer the question of why Poland remained anti-Semitic despite the fact that very few Jews lingered in Poland after World War II (many who survived emigrated, often to Israel or America). He concludes that the presence of even a few Jews reminded the Poles that, unless all Jews were to disappear, one day the Poles might need to account for their behavior and for what they had taken materially from the Jews during the war. “Each village in Poland has its own contentious micro-economic history of the redistribution of Jewish wealth, which cannot be told without mutual recriminations even by Polish

beneficiaries alone.” Most Poles did not want the Jews to return to their homes, because often the Jews’ home had become someone else’s home, and the Jews’ piano, or jewelry, or artwork, had become the property of a non-Jewish Pole.

There are many accounts of Jews being murdered when they returned after the war and demanded their property back, but does Gross’s argument fully explain the reasons behind all wanton acts of violence committed by Poles, such as throwing people who “looked Jewish” off trains? There are other possible explanations for the Poles’ violent behavior: a desire to force all Jews to leave Poland, or maybe an unwillingness to believe or even contemplate the stories of Jews who had survived concentration camps. Or the explanation might simply be that of hatred, entrenched after centuries of blood libel stories, pogroms, and finally, the Nazis’ propaganda and the Holocaust. Whether one agrees with Gross’s explanation or not, it is highly disturbing—and important—to consider why the Poles, who had also been terrorized under the Nazi

occupation, chose to turn on those who as a people had suffered the most horrors.

Gross's book is exemplary in the research it introduces, and his passion for the subject—his pain at what human beings can inflict on others—comes out clearly in the way he describes stories terrible to read. The book also weaves the story of Poland's takeover by the Communists and includes information about anti-Semitism in Soviet Russia and its influence on Poland. One small complaint as to the structure of the work: some of the most relevant stories are presented in the footnotes (of which there are many), which breaks up the flow of the reading.

The book focuses on the period directly after the Holocaust, during the first few years of Communist rule. Sadly, anti-Semitism is still alive in Poland today. Where there was once a population of over three million, only 8,000 to 12,000 Jews now reside. Roman Giertych, the leader of the

League of Polish Families (a party known for its anti-Jewish stances), was recently appointed Minister of Education. On May 28, 2006, the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, was attacked by a man with ties to neo-Nazi groups. There is some good news amid the bad, as the Museum of the History of Polish Jews is under development in Warsaw. It will help the world to understand the tremendous loss that has been sustained with the disappearance of Polish Jewry, and one hopes it will help Poland acknowledge its past. Gross's *Fear* is an important reminder that anti-Semitism, in Europe and elsewhere, did not end with the end of the Holocaust.

Alexandra Levy is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences. She is majoring in History and Economics.