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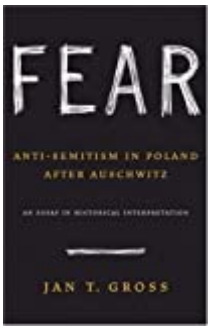

Jan T. Gross. *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation.* New York: Princeton University Press, 2006. ix + 303 pp. $25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-12878-8.

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Chasing Away the Memory of Guilt: The End of Jewish Life in Poland

Collective memory is a battlefield, and Jan Gross fights for the memory of Jewish victims who were victimized not by Nazis but by Poles both during and after World War II. In 2001, Gross published *Neighbors*, in which he documented how Poles murdered their Jewish neighbors in the village of Jedwabne in the summer of 1941.[1] The book was met in Poland with a simultaneous thunderstorm of denial and honest debate. In Polish collective memory, the body politic is the ultimate victim, almost a political Christ figure. Poland's history is the history of endless partitions and occupations, cadencing at the end with the two worst occupations conceivable, first by the Nazis and then the Stalinists, the two archetypal totalitarian regimes.

It is easy to see how a people with such a self-image would be outraged by Jan Gross, who completely turned their group identity on its ear. In his *Neighbors*, Poles were not simply the occupied and powerless victims of Nazi oppression, but willing executioners who with joy and passion took the opportunity of a German occupation to get rid of their Jewish neighbors.

After the publication of his book, historians started to look more closely at the history of the Poles under Hitler only to discover that Jedwabne was not an isolated case. There were many Jedwabnes where Poles killed their Jewish neighbors. And even though there was a short moment, when in 2001 then-president Aleksander Kwasniewski publicly apologized for Jedwabne, five years later the people of Jedwabne still choose to remember the Polish residents exiled to the Soviet Union instead. And they, of course, blame the Jews for that as well.

I thought of the Campo dei Fiori In Warsaw by the sky-carousel One clear spring evening To the strains of a carnival tune. The bright melody drowned The salvos from the ghetto wall, And couples were flying High in the cloudless sky.[2]

This is how the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz described the way Poles in Warsaw watched the destruction of the Jewish ghetto in 1943. Witnessing the destruction of Polish Jewry forms the core of Gross's new book *Fear*, which is chronologically situated after the liberation of the camps and the return of Jewish survivors to their former homes. Contrary to the assumption that with the

end of World War II and the defeat of Germany, the ordeal of the Jews would be over, survivors experienced another round of fear, killings, and near escapes. Gross uses *Fear* to attempt to account for this state of affairs. In particular, he asks why Poles killed Jews who returned home and more generally why anti-Semitism was not completely de-legitimized after Auschwitz. And it went even deeper than that. Gross begins his book by wondering why Poles who saved Jewish lives during the war did not want their identities revealed. Why were Poles courageous enough to defy death at the hands of the Nazis so afraid of their Polish neighbors after the war? Over 90 percent of the 3.5 million Jews who lived in Poland in 1935 were killed by 1945. The surviving Polish Jewish population in the summer of 1946 was approximately 200,000. And of those 200,000, historians now estimate that approximately 1500 were killed by Poles after returning home. It is obviously a drop in the sea in quantitative terms compared with the Nazi killings. But it had a substantial historical effect–ethnically cleansing most of the Jews who survived and who at first chose to return home after the war. Had these killings not happened, there would still have been a substantial Jewish community. And the Nazi experience of the systematic destruction of the Jews amplified the killings rather than diminished them. The point is not that Jews were being killed at a lower rate but that *Poles* were killing Jews. Given the last decade or more of violence, the only rational course left to a Polish Jew was to flee immediately. Gross makes quite clear that this was one of the intentions of the killings: to chase the Jews out of Poland. Those who stubbornly remained were expelled in two later waves, that were albeit less violent but just as effective, in 1956 and 1968. And with that, the ethnic cleansing of Jews by Poles was as good as completed. When the Jews left, the memory of the Jewish Holocaust left with them. Poland had nothing to disturb the memory of its own victimization. This is the payoff of successful ethnic cleaning. It becomes easier to forget a crime when no witnesses remain. The resulting country is considered "normal" because ethnic homogeneity is considered normal–a group enters Freud's second stage of repression, where the group forgets that it forgot.

Gross tries to harmonize several explanations for such persistent and purposeful Polish behavior. In the first place it is plain, old-fashioned Polish anti-Semitism, a simple outgrowth of Polish ethnic consciousness that existed long before the Nazi occupation and the postwar chaos gave it freedom to expand. Read the account of the Kielce-Pogrom in the summer of 1946–the centerpiece of the book–and you may find yourself transported back in time. It all started with the old accusation that Jews were in dire need of Christian blood. But this time, the blood-libel had a twist. Jews were weakened by their camp experiences and needed Christian blood to become strong again. Gross not only analyzes the pogrom, but also looks carefully at the reactions of those who could have made a difference–police, prosecutors, and most importantly, the Church. Nobody seemed slightly interested in what was happening to the Jews.

It all sounds so familiar, but Gross is not satisfied with this explanation alone. For him more is at stake here. First, there is the very simple explanation of material interest. Poles profited from the Holocaust. They took over Jewish property and moved into vacated professions. Jewish houses, farms, and stores were taken over by Poles; Jewish goods were stolen ("taken over"). For the Poles, ownership seemed firmly established, when all of a sudden Jews returned and wanted their property back. The Poles were outraged by this. Most of their neighbors could go on living with stolen Jewish property since most of the Jews didn't return, but some did, some came back and made demands. Gross reconstructs how these minority Poles might have felt and how victimized they believed themselves to be when their neighbors were still living on stolen Jewish property.

But within this material explanation, Gross weaves another. Surviving Jews reminded Poles of their witnessing of the Holocaust. It reminded them of their moral breakdown during the occupation. And more than that, since Poles legitimized and witnessed the killings on their doorstep, they were forced to renounce their own claims to victimhood. "It is, indeed, human nature to hate the man whom you have injured," Gross quotes Tacitus (p. 258). Poles were afraid of the Jews after the war because Jews reminded them of what they really were and not what they wanted to believe about themselves. The killings and subsequent ethnic cleansing of the Jews in Poland occurred at the same time as the ethnic cleansing of Jewish memory from Polish history, while at the same time keeping alive the myth of Jewish Communism, the last reminder of Jewish presence in Polish history.

Gross makes a strong intellectual effort to disassemble and refute one of the biggest myths of Polish attitudes towards the Jews, what is called in Polish *Zydokomuna*. This means that Polish hatred of the Jews was legitimate because of the Jewish affiliation with communism. According to *zydokomuna*, Jews used communism to conquer Poland and the Poles. Clearly, there were Jewish communists. That is not the point. How could an ideol-