

Seen from Jedwabne

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For someone like me--Jewish by origin and a realist by nature--the discussion that has been taking place in my country about Jewish-Polish grudges and prejudices seems unthinkable. President Aleksander Kwaśniewski's courage in giving the anniversary events of July 10, 2001 so much official importance and the apologetic gesture by the Polish bishops still seem hard to believe.

After what has happened this year, there are two versions of the Jedwabne events functioning in Poland. "The guilt version," toward which the National Memory Institute's² investigation seems to be pointing, is fairly clear by now, although it may still take months before the final verdict is in. In this scenario the Germans probably gave permission, the Germans maybe planned the massacre in advance, but the Poles performed the actual crime.

"The innocence version" has very little in common with the former. The time and place might remain the same, but the course of action is very different. This version has many variants, but all of them simultaneously stress two points: that the crime was committed by the Germans; and that the Jews "had asked for it." During the time of Soviet occupation, it is said, the Jews betrayed Poland and collaborated with the aggressor, while the Poles were fighting and being deported to Siberia. That is the supposed background to what happened in Jedwabne (pre-war Polish-Jewish relations, according to this version, had nothing to do with

¹ Editor's Note: Anna Bikont has published numerous articles on the Jedwabne controversy, both in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's most widely-read daily newspaper, and elsewhere. See, especially, two articles in English: "We from Jedwabne," July 11, 2001; and "They Had the Vodka, the Guns, and the Hatred," July 17, 2001, www.wyborcza.pl. The original versions of these articles appeared in *Gazeta Wyborcza*: "My z Jedwabnego," March 23, 2001; "Mieli wódkę, broń i nienawiść," June 15, 2001. Bikont is currently completing a book related to this subject.

² In the summer of 2000, the Polish government assigned the Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej the task of investigating the events in Jedwabne and issuing an official report on what happened there in July 1941.

the events). The supporters of this approach seem to miss the point that if it was done by the Germans, than Jews' attitude to Poles during the Soviet occupation is of no relevance.

I will base my reconstruction of "the innocence version" on the speech given by Senator Jadwiga Stolarska, who represents the region that includes Jedwabne. She delivered the speech on September 13, 2001, during a Senate debate on the National Memory Institute's activity. Following are some excerpts:

In 1939, after the Russians entered, the Jews took over all the offices, including the town hall. They were given weapons by the Russians, and formed a police force. Many young Jews started joining the NKVD, the Komsomol and the Bolshevik party. In Jedwabne the Jews made a list of Poles to be deported and then they supervised the deportations. They also helped the NKVD and the Red Army in disclosing and destroying the Polish resistance movement. Father Szumowski, a priest belonging to the resistance movement, was arrested.

Since the Wehrmacht identified a couple of dozen Jewish NKVD groups that had previously attacked the Germans, they decided to kill all the young Jews and their families. On July 10, 1941, three Gestapo units came to Jedwabne: a SA storm troop, a NSDAP motorized unit and a NSPK air service group from Ciechanów. Held at gunpoint and beaten with rifles, the Poles were forced to bring the Jews out of their houses and escort them to the market square. The Germans doused aircraft fuel on the barn, surrounded it and set it on fire. The Jews in the barn were not killed as Jews but as communists or as communists' families; they were sentenced by the Wehrmacht in Bialystok. There was no way a Pole could kill a Jew.

It is useless to wonder what psychotherapeutic reasons one might have to blame the Jews for collaborating with the Soviets when, in fact, almost everybody in Jedwabne had

their share in the collaboration--though in most cases unwillingly; for example, by accepting Soviet citizenship. Nor does it make much sense to elaborate on the lack of evidence for the Jewish contribution in denouncing the Polish resistance movement. On the contrary, it is well known that there were Poles who would denounce the resistance people. It was, in fact, known almost immediately, for, late in June 1941, right after the new occupation began, two Polish traitors were brought to the Germans and killed. The idea of storm troops, motor troops, and air units coming to Jedwabne is a ridiculous fantasy, based on no documents whatsoever. And so on.

It is difficult to tell how many Poles accept which version. However, the results of a public-opinion poll after the commemoration events, on July 10, give us an idea about the likely proportions.³ Ten percent blamed only the Poles for the massacre; 27 percent of the people believed that Poles had participated in it; 28 percent blamed only the Germans.

It is easy to say, though, that the proportions would be in Jedwabne certainly more extreme.

Senator Stolarska's version of the events is perfectly in accordance with that of Father Orłowski, the Jedwabne priest; in fact, when I interviewed him he proudly admitted to his authorship. One can, therefore, safely assume it is the only accepted version in Jedwabne. After July 10, when the people of Jedwabne uniformly refused to participate in what they called "the Jewish celebration," some more "spicy" details were added to this version. Thus, Father Orłowski gave me an example of how the Jews are to blame for all evils. He said there was a Wehrmacht captain by the name of Waldemar Macholl who had prepared and announced the sentence according to which forty to fifty young Jews were to be shot, while the rest would be burned. That captain, said Father Orłowski, was in fact a Jew from Suwałki.

³ The poll was conducted by CBOS, the Public Opinion Research Center, August 3-6, 2001, and was published in *Rzeczpospolita*, September 7, 2001.

Father Orłowski added he had in his possession documents that attested to all those facts, but, because of the seal of confession, he could not present them to the National Memory Institute.

Before the war the part of Poland in which Jedwabne is located was almost completely dominated by the National Democratic Party (Narodowa Demokracja; Endecja), which spread antisemitic slogans. The Catholic Church contributed to this a great deal, giving the National Democrats steady support. Those influences still exist. In Jedwabne, the custom of sharing books is not terribly widespread, but even before the story of the massacre became public, people would lend each other antisemitic brochures. One that was particularly popular in Jedwabne was prepared and circulated by the Security Service during the period of martial law in the 1980s. It was a fake interview allegedly made by Hanna Krall with Bronisław Geremek, who was then an advisor to the Solidarity movement, and to Lech Wałęsa. In that interview the Jew Geremek allegedly was telling Krall how much he hated the Poles.

Nowadays the most popular weekly in Jedwabne is *Nasza Polska* (“Our Poland”) --a magazine run by Leszek Bubel, a fanatical antisemite who once ran for president. Another periodical, named *Najjaśniejsza Rzeczpospolita* (“The Supreme Republic”), was distributed at the station, in the market square, and is available on the church. The headline read: “Szmul Winterszajs [a vulgar deformation of the name Wasersztajn], Jew, secret police scoundrel, PPR-*Führer* [PPR was the Polish communist party’s name after the war], falsely accuses the Poles of the Jedwabne massacre.”

In one of the town offices, a brochure printed on glossy paper was distributed among the trusted employees. It had been sent by the American-Polish diaspora and was entitled: “What Happened in Jedwabne and How.” It began with the following sentence: “There was no crime in the history of Poland that the Jews hadn’t committed first.” The list of the crimes throughout Polish history is curious: it involves Cain’s murder of Abel and the crucifixion of

Jesus Christ; it ends with the “Moscow-inspired, Jewish Communist provocation of the Kielce pogrom in 1946.”

The Holocaust Industry by Norman Finkelstein reached Jedwabne the moment it was translated into Polish.⁴ This does not mean that everybody in Jedwabne reads it before going to sleep, but I have heard the title mentioned in every discussion.

The most active propagandists of Father Orłowski’s version are the contemporary forty-year olds. Most of them have family links with the murderers, though not necessarily blood connections (sometimes it was the father-in-law who took part in the massacre). Perhaps the most shocking aspect of the story is that there is a new generation guarding the forged memory and defending the fathers who took part in the murder. Whenever they saw me in Jedwabne, those forty-year olds would shout angrily: “You hate the Poles. That’s because Michnik⁵ is a Jew, everybody knows that.”

Here are a few samples of what my interlocutors have said:

The Jews are taking over all the offices, in the government and in the Church. Why are you trying to uncover all this in Jedwabne? It’s a gold mine. The Jews want to squeeze money out of us. It was a mistake of the town authorities to let the Jews in and let them dig up the Jewish truth. That’s not our truth. The journalists coming here are Jewish citizens. Gross looks like a madman. When I go abroad, I’m not allowed to do anything I want, and those Jews act as if they were at home.

⁴ Editor’s Note: Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso, 2000). Finkelstein’s very controversial book has been widely criticized for its vicious diatribe against Holocaust memorial institutions. He contends that they have exploited the Holocaust and have manipulated the American government in order to press lawsuits against Swiss banks and to be awarded large sums of money in general.

⁵ Adam Michnik, a former Solidarity and anti-communist opposition activist, is editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

That book by Gross is one great lie. Some of the houses here used to be Jewish, but mine belongs to me. I never profited on the whole thing. I know how vengeful the kikes are.

That Jew Wasersztajn, he was treated so well and look how he paid us back, spitting on our parents. What a disgrace!

Perhaps the version advanced by Senator Stolarska and Father Orłowski is simply an endemic phenomenon and an understandable result of the frustration resulting from attack and accusation. After all, these people are not responsible for their ancestors' crimes. This is actually an interpretation I often hear. Every now and then one of my kind-hearted friends asks how one might help the people of Jedwabne, especially those unhappy ones whose ancestors actually took part in the massacre.

My feeling is that one ought to support those few individuals in Jedwabne who are really being attacked, i.e., those who had the courage to oppose their own neighbors and the priest. In fact, some of the people in Jedwabne are now feeling a lot better than before. They had been living a frustrated small-town life, without great opportunities or great hopes for the future, far away from all the major events. Now they are of interest to important people like Senator Stolarska. Now they are visited by famous individuals, such as film director Bohdan Poreba (known not only for his films, but also for having been a member of the antisemitic Grunwald organization, which enjoyed the Communist Party's support in the 1980s). They are given moral support by such authorities as Professor Tomasz Strzembosz.⁶ And if they go to the United States (illegal work abroad is an important source of income for people in the

⁶ Editor's Note: See Strzembosz's article, "Inscribed in Professor Gutman's Diary," in this volume.

region), the Polish community in Chicago will welcome them warmly and will immediately find them jobs.

Most of the people living in Jedwabne came there after the war. They are not as fierce, but, on the other hand, they feel unjustly accused and that makes them eager to believe the second version. Both groups are united in their refusal to remember.

Recently, I was walking on Przytulska Street, where, before the war, lived: Mojsze Białoszewski, Jankel Blumert, Josle Cynowicz, Fajba Drejarski, Symcha Grajewski, Mejer Grondowski, Jankiel Josel, Berek Jedwabiński, Mosiek Kamionowski, Ici Kapuśniak, Osier Krzywonos, Mosiek Lasko, Anter Marchewko, Eli Pecynowicz, Jankel Piekarski, Jankel Semborski, Icek Stolarski, Daniel Szklarkiewicz, Berek Szmujel, Szmul Wajsztajn, Calka Wasersztajn, Abram Zaborowski, Menek Zaborowski, Abram Zajdensztat, Wolf Zimny, probably with their children, wives, and grandparents. I asked the present inhabitants if they had ever heard the names of the Jews who used to live on their street, and they would answer: “Now, don’t you try to threaten us. We have all the papers proving our ownership of this house.”

The morning after the anniversary events on July 10, 2001, I went back to Jedwabne with Jakub Pecynowicz and his three daughters. He had been drafted by the Soviets and had survived, but most of his relatives had been burned in the barn. Now he lives in Yehud, Israel. Before the war his family used to live at the end of Przytulska Street, and they owned a mill. When we approached, a young woman was standing in the front yard of the house next door. This was the conversation that ensued:

“We used to have a mill here,” Pecynowicz said.

“It’s we who didn’t live here back then, that are now suffering the most.”

“The cemetery was that way. This was our private path,” Pecynowicz continued, smiling to her.

“Why do our children have to suffer for this?”

“The house was all wooden. It was long, it had just one floor, and then there was a little building where we kept the grain and the oil. I had four brothers and two sisters; there were Josef, Frumka and Mosze, then I was born, and then Sara and Jenon.”

The woman in the yard was clearly getting impatient:

“I have no idea what happened with the house. We have already built ourselves a new one.”

How many people are there in Jedwabne who do not quite believe the mandatory “innocence version”? Very few openly oppose it, and their number is shrinking.

The mayor of Jedwabne, Krzysztof Godlewski, is considering emigrating to the United States. He resisted all the pressures from the town council and from the priest not to take part in the anniversary events on July 10 (the council forbade him to participate in an official statement). As a result the council forced him to resign, and his dismissal was welcomed with great joy.

Mieczysław Dziejic and his son, Janusz Leszek Dziejic, have already moved to the United States. After they told the media about what had happened sixty years before, they experienced so much physical aggression from their neighbors that they just could not cope with it.⁷

I would like to elaborate a little about Leszek Dziejic, because he is an example of what the second generation of Poles after the Holocaust might have thought had their parents

⁷ See Andrzej Kaczyński, “Nie zabijaj,” *Rzeczpospolita*, July 10, 2000; Adam Willma, “Broda mojego syna,” *Gazeta Pomorska*, August 4, 2000; Anna Bikont, “We from Jedwabne”; Agnieszka Arnold, “Sąsiedzi,” documentary film, TVP Program 2, April 3-4, 2001.

raised them differently. Besides, his story gives us an idea about the predominant atmosphere in the town.

I talked with him many times before he left for the United States. I could always rely on his support when I was in the area. For example, I would park the car in his yard--which was not at all a self-evident favor. My other interlocutors (the two other exceptions being the mayor and the head of the town council) would ask me to park it somewhere else and visit them only after dark.

“My grandmother always used to say the time would come when it would become known who was responsible for Katyn⁸ and who killed the Jews. She didn’t live to see either,” I was told by Dziejdzic in our first conversation in the autumn of 1999.

When I was a child, I liked to follow my father around wherever he went, so I would listen to those stories. I knew Szmul Wasersztajn had been hiding in our house, but I also knew I was not supposed to tell anyone about it. My father had his bike tires cut a couple of times after those interviews he gave last summer. This is a certain kind of community; whatever bad thing happens, it always turns out to be the Jews. I have been hearing this since I was born--whether about bad government, bad weather or a dying cow, it was always the Jews’ fault. When someone was going to the market and the child wanted to come along, people would say, “I’m not taking you there, because a child has to kiss a Jew’s beard before entering the market.” Or, if a child didn’t want to sleep, they’d say, “Be good, or the Jews will come and make *matzos* out of you.” Children were taught to be scared of Jews, that’s how they were raised, and it didn’t change after the war. My father had money because he was a good farmer and a prudent manager, my mom used to get up at night to pick strawberries and carry them

⁸ The reference is to the site near Smolensk where thousands of Polish officers were shot by Soviet forces in 1940.

to the market in the morning. And the people would say we had Jewish money for helping the Jews. Now I keep hearing that the Jews got what they deserved, because they had been denouncing Poles to the NKVD. I no longer have the energy to tell them that the Poles did that, too, I just ask “And what were those children guilty of?”

After that, Dziedzic went to the United States for a couple of months to visit his brothers, but he soon returned.

When my wife was left alone with the children, somebody kept trying to kidnap the younger one. A man in his fifties was watching the school, then one day he went to my son, grabbed his hand and tried to walk away with him. Fortunately, the teacher noticed and ran after them. Two weeks later he came around again, waiting. My son described him to my wife, she found him, told the police and went there with a policeman who just asked the guy his name and let him go. He didn't even look at his documents, although my wife was asking him to. The man said he was working in a nearby school and his name was Janusz Malinowski. We checked, but there was no one of that name working there. It might have been an accident, but we are anxious about the child. We walk him to school and then pick him up,

Janusz Dziedzic was telling me this in early 2001, and at that time he still said that he would not surrender and leave his piece of farmland in Jedwabne. Eventually, however, he did give up. He moved to the United States, and did so before July 10, even though he really wanted to take part in the anniversary events.

Shortly before their departure, Janusz Leszek's wife, Ewa, told me:

They said they would burn our house. We were getting so paranoid I wouldn't be able to sleep through a single night if my husband wasn't a hunter and didn't have a rifle home. But I still kept waking up and crying. People were pointing at our children and saying, "Look, there's the Dziejzics' son." I had a friend whose son used to visit our children, till his schoolmates told him "You're visiting those Jewish lapdogs" and he never came again. They kept calling us "Jewish lapdogs" in the street; it was so terrible. My father-in-law, who spends most of his time at his sons' in the U.S., came to Poland to take part in the anniversary events, and a friend told him, "Better keep quiet, they're already out to get you." He went to the local clinic, visited the neighbors and heard so many stories he just went back to the States right away. I had no friends left myself; lost every single one. Wherever we went, people would point their fingers at us. When I went to a shop, my neighbors would turn their backs. When I walked into the teachers' room at school, to ask something about the children, everybody fell silent. The priest kept throwing calumnies at us, saying Leszek was no Catholic if he could say what he said. It was impossible to live in Jedwabne anymore. My husband used to have such good friends and now they'd no longer shake his hand, because he was considered a traitor.

"We couldn't stand the tension and the hostility that surrounded us," Janusz Leszek Dziejzic added.

I'd go shopping and hear "You Jewish lapdog" on the way. And in the shop there was dead silence. I've always been strong enough not to be afraid of anybody. When I was young, I just used to say, "Don't you hit me, or you'll be very sorry." But now, just before leaving, I was getting afraid. They weakened me mentally with their talk; in

the shop I instinctively kept close to the wall, so that nobody would hit me from behind. But most of all, we were afraid about the children. Plus I just couldn't stand listening to all the crap. I was in the shop once, and the owner's mother came out and said, "One should chase away all those Jews that come here to make interviews." The people were mainly scared that the Jews would take back what they'd been robbed of. They kept saying: "The Jews will take back what's theirs," not "ours," but "theirs." And they were saying nobody from Jedwabne should participate in the anniversary events, everybody must draw their window curtains. They told me: "No patriot would do what you did," and I would say I was my country's patriot, not the murderers' patriot and that I was betraying the murderers, not the country. We lost all our friends one by one; nobody would visit us anymore. We were being slandered all the time. I kept talking back. One man said my father used to dig after the Jews' golden teeth and now was making himself a defender of the Jews. I said "Yeah, right, he did, and then he went down to your cellar and melted them down together with your father." Another time a friend of my father's said to me: "You Jewish lapdog, I wish I could just take a gun and shoot all the ones like you." And I said, "Just remember to bury me well, not like that Jewish woman you killed, who was later dug up by dogs." When the journalists started coming and my father talked to them, people would ask me, "How much was your father paid for that interview?" I asked one of them, "And how much was your father paid for murdering the Jews?" and he turned beet-red. It hurts him to know the truth, that his father raped a Jewish woman and cut her head off. But how long can you talk back? Somebody was saying my name wasn't Polish, because Polish ones end with a -ski. Another one was calling me a "rabbi," obviously thinking it was an insult. We had a good friend in Jedwabne, he knows what we know and thinks the same. I met him in the market square the other day, he exchanged a

word with me and then was gone. He's feeling threatened, too, only he cannot escape to America, so he was afraid they would start picking on him even more. All the decent people in Jedwabne are scared. The main authority here is the antisemites' antisemite Leszek Bubel; our priest encouraged people to read his periodicals. They were distributed in front of the church when the Bishop [of Łomża Kazimierz] Stefanek was here. And sixty years ago it was people like that, just like the ones that are threatening us now, who robbed their own neighbors, Poles like us, of their lives. Now we have the same kind of people, the same kind of priest, and if someone gave them permission, some of the people in Jedwabne would do again what their fathers once did. Only this time there are no Jews left to burn.

In the entire town of Jedwabne, there was this one courageous man, Janusz Leszek Dziedzic. And now he is gone. But, perhaps, when the National Memory Institute's investigation is completed, the Jedwabne negationists' self-confidence will end. Perhaps then the "guilt version" will be legitimized.

Personally, I doubt it. In fact, I think both versions of the "Jedwabne events" will take their place in the history schoolbooks. There are actually a number of different history textbooks being used in Poland--that's part of our young democracy. One of the authors of modern history textbooks, Andrzej Leszek Szczęśniak, participates in discussions on Jedwabne, organized in church buildings, where the object of hatred is world Jewry in general and Jan Tomasz Gross in particular. I heard Szczęśniak speak to a large audience at a meeting that took place in the Warsaw Dominican Church on April 7, 2001:

The martyrdom of the Polish nation is at stake. They're trying to steal it from us. We're being robbed of our suffering. The noise around the Jedwabne affair is

supposed to deafen the Poles and to squeeze 65 million dollars out of our nation as part of the Holocaust *gescheft*.

Some time ago I tried fighting Szcześniak's antisemitic textbooks. After an article published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 1999⁹ a protest letter was sent to the Ministry of Education, signed by over 200 artists, writers and intellectuals. Soon, however, a large group of signatures was collected under another letter that was defending the textbook that "promoted Polish values." Among the signatories was one of the future defenders of Father Orłowski's version, Jerzy Robert Nowak, author of a book *100 Lies by J.T. Gross*.¹⁰ Gradually, the whole question was dropped.

It seems then that the two versions of the Jedwabne event will continue to live their parallel lives.

Translated from the Polish by Lukasz Sommer

⁹ Anna Bikont and Maria Kruczkowska, "Nadal reprezentuję opcję Polską," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, March 6-7, 1999.

¹⁰ Jerzy Robert Nowak, *100 kłamstw J.T.Grossa o żydowskich sąsiadach w Jedwabnem* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Von Borowiecky, 2001).