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Working through Jan Gross's *Neighbors*

Janine P. Holc

The topic of Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* is the transformation, by violence, of a multiethnic community in Poland into an ethnically and religiously homogenous one, in the context of the terror of World War II. *Neighbors* documents the murder of the Jews living in a small town in eastern Poland during the German occupation, not by the Nazis or the German army, but by the non-Jewish Polish residents of the town, who had lived alongside their Jewish neighbors for generations. By focusing so intensely on this single massacre, *Neighbors* effectively challenges the standard view that non-Jewish Poles had little responsibility for the fate of Jews living in Poland during World War II, as well as the tendency to assume, as the author puts it, that "these two ethnic groups' histories are disengaged."¹

Neighbors has created enormous debate and controversy in Poland, and in so doing has contributed to an ongoing reevaluation of Polish national identity. Readers will benefit from pairing this text with a special collection of Polish responses, published in English as *Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne*, or with an edited volume on Jewish history in Poland, *Polin: Focusing on the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*.² Gross's intention is in part to correct a cultural reluctance in Poland to acknowledge the extent of anti-Semitism in its history and its consequent neglect of Jewish accounts as historical resources. To achieve the goal of disrupting established historical formulas, the author invokes brutal details of violence, incorporates his own sense of moral outrage, and invites the reader to share his shock in the event and his emotional investment in its implications.

According to the evidence Gross presents, the massacre in Jedwabne took place largely on a single day, 10 July 1941, during a period in which the German army was only beginning to institutionalize its control of eastern Poland. With the withdrawal of the Soviet forces came the realization that the new occupiers would not punish violence against Jews or the expropriation of their property; this reality, combined with the strongly anti-Semitic political culture fostered in the prewar years, set the stage for the event. It was preceded by several individual acts of violence against Jews by Polish non-Jews on 25 June, and an order (that we do not know much about) on 10 July from a handful of Gestapo agents regarding Jedwabne's Jewish population. The massacre began when Polish town officials, led by

1. Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, 2001), 9.

2. *Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne* (Warsaw, 2001); Antony Polonsky, ed., *Polin: Focusing on the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (London, 2001).

the mayor, summoned all the Jewish residents to the town square. It continued through individual acts of humiliation and violence and ended when a number of the non-Jewish Poles forced approximately 1,600 Jews, including women and children, into a barn and set it on fire, killing everyone trapped inside. Gross also describes what followed after the victims had been killed, including disputes over the disposal of the corpses, the appropriation of the “leftover” Jewish property by some of the town residents, and the fate of a Catholic family who had hidden a group of Jews and whom locals drove out of town. Using survivor testimony and court documents from a 1953 trial, Gross finds that, although a handful of German police were present, the massacre was carried out by the Poles themselves, with little restraint and no protest.

Gross appends a series of short essays to his study. These offer insights, speculation, and further source material that touch on such issues as the collapse of easy victim-perpetrator distinctions, Polish stereotypes of the Jewish origins of Stalinist leaders after the war, the problematic status of Catholic Poles who did shelter Jews, and the limits of Holocaust representation in light of the death of an enormous majority of the victims.

Rather than provide a single, consistent approach, *Neighbors* offers the reader a number of possibilities for contextualizing the evidence of the massacre, all of which generate new questions and new ways of approaching historiographical issues. By resisting the temptation to situate the massacre within a single historiographic interpretation, *Neighbors* both unnerves readers and compels them to engage more deeply with its truths.

Notably, Gross refuses to participate in the normalization of ethnic conflict that characterizes some scholarly work on cultural relations in eastern Europe. From the title onward, the reader is confronted with an interpretation of life in Jedwabne as a shared experience. In a town of 2,500, in which two-thirds of the residents are Jewish and the rest Polish and mostly Catholic, it would have been difficult for anyone to engage in economic, social, and political life without substantial interaction with people of a religion or ethnicity different from his or her own. Certainly mutual dislike and suspicion were present; particular Catholic Poles hated particular Jewish Poles and vice versa; and authorities doled out privileges and punishments to accommodate and encourage these animosities. Gross points out that the waves of occupiers—German, Soviet, German—created incentives for the “institutionalization of resentment,” a concept he does not systematically pursue throughout the book. But Jedwabne residents, like many residents of similar towns throughout Poland, were indeed neighbors.

For Gross, it was not religious or ethnic difference itself that determined the conflict; in this way, his text does not, as some critics have claimed, find all non-Jewish Poles collectively anti-Semitic, guilty, or murderous, a point that will be explored further below. He avoids situating the Jedwabne experience among other anti-Jewish pogroms that occurred prior to or after the war, although he does mention them; the text discusses a similar massacre in the same month in the nearby town of Radziłów at length. But Gross does not want his treatment of Jedwabne to be lost

among the thousands of other instances of anti-Jewish violence throughout the region, a narrative trajectory that (perhaps unintentionally) creates the idea that ethnic conflict, particularly involving Jews, is common and thus “normal.”

The singularity and texture of the Jedwabne experience is powerfully communicated by Gross's reliance on individual testimonies gathered through direct interviews, reviews of interviews conducted by others, and memoirs. It also makes this an atypical work of east European history. Testimonials have been viewed as problematic tools for validating historical facts, but Gross defends the role of survivor accounts in historical scholarship as not only an overlooked resource but our best avenue for capturing realities that dominant cultural ideologies have kept hidden. He presents the lengthy and detailed 1945 testimony of a single witness, Szmul Wasersztajn, who describes the brutality of the event and documents the absence of more than a handful of German authorities, which supports the claim that Poles themselves carried out the murder under no real threat of death to themselves. Rather than viewing this testimony with skepticism, Gross asks, what if we approached this source as if it were accurate, “as fact until we find persuasive arguments to the contrary?”³ What supporting documentation might we find? He finds quite a bit, including court documents from a 1953 trial of some of the perpetrators, prior analyses of the event by a journalist and a historian, and memoirs of survivors or family members of the deceased.

Furthermore, the reliance on testimonials (including the court documents) allows for a portrayal of identifiable individuals who took concrete actions—providing kerosene, turning away from a call for help, stoning a youth to death—leading to mass murder and thus clearly highlights the thorny issue of accountability. The level of detail and local context expressed in the evidence functions to make this event a specific crime with particular criminals; at the same time, the fact that these individuals were longtime neighbors of the victims, as well as Catholic Poles, undermines claims that non-Jewish Poles had no role in the Holocaust. In other words, rather than providing a stark choice between dismissing the massacre as the work of marginalized “hooligans,” on the one hand, and collective national responsibility or guilt, on the other, *Neighbors* presents a case of individual choices mediated by ethnic and religious identities, strongly felt and linked to material sources of power.

The issue of individual decisions in a community demoralized by war and permeated by ethnic distinctions becomes more complex when inaction as well as action is considered. On the first reading, it seems that *Neighbors* is concerned with the motivations of those who massacred Jedwabne's Jews, and it presents these motivations as a mix of anti-Semitism and the desire for the property “leftover” by the dead. An alternative interpretation of the title suggests another, more difficult question, however: how did the rest of the non-Jewish residents of Jedwabne respond when a minority among them began the violence? Could many of these

3. Gross, *Neighbors*, 139–40.

Poles have intervened to stop their neighbors, in this case neither Nazis nor Soviets but a small-town mayor, a number (perhaps ninety or so) of residents, and a handful of outsiders? This question is concretized in the testimony of Jedwabne resident Karol Bardon, who ran into two non-Jewish Poles on that day beating a Jewish acquaintance of Bardon's: "Zdrojewicz said to me, Save me, Mister Bardon. Being afraid of these murderers, I replied, I cannot help you with anything, and I passed them by."⁴ Which to emphasize, Bardon's fear of his fellow Poles, or his decision to pass by without intervening?

The text does not, however, present an unambiguous or consistently argued case for the role of individual agency. Gross tells us that "in each episode [of local mass killing in east European history] many specific individual decisions were made by different actors present on the scene, who decisively influenced outcomes. . . . [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."⁵ Along with the statement above, we find generalizations about collective agents—"the Polish half of a town murders its Jewish half"—and a description of the perpetrators as "willing executioners," evoking Daniel Goldhagen's national determinism.⁶

How historically determined was the loss of the Jewish presence in Poland? When this tension explicitly arises, Gross appears to conflate "choice" and "determinism" through a not-so-slippery slope of moral agency transformed into a national essence: "When reflecting on this epoch, we must not assign collective responsibility. We must be clear-headed 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."⁷

Gross defines "collective identity" as a "canon" that is "assembled from deeds that are . . . special, striking" like Fryderyk Chopin's *études* and, presumably, Jedwabne's burning barn. If a non-Jewish Pole claims Chopin as part of her collective inheritance, she must also acknowledge significant acts of violence or brutality. For Gross, selecting only commendable deeds as part of one's national identity is a facile act of self-indulgence and not a genuine engagement with one's actual collective identity.

Neighbors is also atypical of historical and social science scholarship in two other ways. First, Gross keeps the brutality of the event and his condemnation of the neglect of Jewish testimonial sources in postwar Poland at the forefront of the argument. The text refuses to limit the moral implications of its subject by relegating them to a short concluding chapter, as much of our work in this field does.

This refusal is paralleled by another, that of containing the concept of "the Holocaust" within the boundaries of German and Nazi behavior and

4. *Ibid.*, 95.

5. *Ibid.*, 12.

6. *Ibid.*, 9, 121; Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1997).

7. Gross, *Neighbors*, 134.

ideology. In Jedwabne, the local population, rather than Nazi totalitarianism or German bureaucrats, contributed to the annihilation of Jewish lives and ways of life. If this is so, what, then, was the Holocaust? *Neighbors* asks us to consider the possibility—gaining ground as more work is done in local archives throughout the eastern regions of Europe—that the Holocaust occurred not only in geographically and temporally circumscribed experiences in camps and ghettos, but in communities to which Jews had contributed for generations. Gross's text explicitly and implicitly recontextualizes Catholic-Jewish relations in Poland during World War II as part of the Holocaust, in the process raising the question of how the historian should properly locate where the annihilation of Europe's Jews ends and "normal" conflict between Jews and non-Jews begins.

An in-depth consideration of this more unlimited Holocaust has been problematic in Poland itself. During World War II, occupying powers—Nazi and Soviet—subjected the non-Jewish citizens of the territories they governed to varying degrees of terror and violence, both arbitrary and rationalized. Yet no ethnic, national, or religious group was the target of the Nazi "Final Solution" other than Jews; no other group faced systematic and total extermination based purely on ethnicity or religion. In Poland, because of the influence of political and cultural taboos in the postwar period, the specificity of Jewish vulnerability was obscured; assertions of the importance of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust in Poland were often posed as threats to the validity of the Catholic Polish experience of victimization, during both the German and the Soviet occupation.

The construction of two separate "victimhood" experiences situated as competitive and mutually exclusive has obscured the aspects of the occupations that resulted in a shared or common vulnerability to violence. It has also created a set of scripted categories that contribute to a sense of mutual exclusion: "pro-Polish or pro-Jewish argument," "collaborator or resister," and, more recently, "accept collective responsibility or contribute to anti-Semitism." *Neighbors* uses some of these terms in their exclusivist meanings, but it simultaneously provides a basis for moving beyond the binaries inherent in competing victimhood, which trap and contain the discourse on moral responsibility. This is the case even when those binaries are apparently progressive, as in the case of "collective responsibility," which appears to provoke non-Jewish Poles into a more "mature" engagement with "their history" but is ultimately a category of subjectivity that brooks no actual progress. This is because it takes the form of "collective guilt," a passive state of consciousness that represses anger and offers no real channels for action. Is an acknowledgement of guilty feelings the same as the active recognition and embrace of the humanity of others, in the form of a common community? Or does the former simply establish a limit, beyond which no further action is needed?

In addition, the relationship of behavior to collective identity concepts is not directly commensurate. The assignment of ethnic and religious categories by local governments, occupying forces, liberators, and one's own family—to name a few such "assigners"—does not, of course, reflect a completely autonomous choice or determine a set consciousness. Yet ethnic categories were extraordinarily determinative during this pe-

riod in deciding life or death, access to positions of power and to resources, and the ability to call on such cultural symbols as the nation. Hierarchies existed within these categories as well, which functioned to include and exclude according to varying situations and standards, and in varying expressive modes.

The challenge that *Neighbors* opens us up to, and which historical and social science research on eastern Europe would do well to take up, is a theorizing of the facts that recognizes the power of ethnic categories as they functioned within a specific historical moment but suspends a reiteration of ethnic determinism in the re-narration of that historical moment. Some level of anti-Semitism passed as reality for the majority of Catholic Poles in 1941; but is this discursive hegemony commensurate with a causal explanation for the murder by Catholic Poles of a group of Jewish Poles, or for the absence of intervention by other Catholic Poles?

This is the unanswered question in *Neighbors*, and the reader is often frustrated by the fluctuation throughout the text between an acknowledgment of the power of ethnicity and a focus on individual decision. I would argue, however, that this fluctuation is ultimately productive in that it signals a resistance to, and even prevents, a definitive choice between them. Such a choice, and its consequent closure of the question of how, for example, a Polish Catholic could commit such an act, would forestall the more productive process of what Dominick LaCapra calls “working through” a historical event rather than simply representing it.⁸ In other words, *Neighbors* does not deliver any kind of “victory” to the so-called Jewish side or the Polish side, but invites us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic between individual decision and social identity in a time of trauma.

This text offers us, then, a number of profound and provocative questions, which, along with a largely emotive tone, the privileging of individual testimony, and a tension in its use of identity categories, results in a rather “undisciplined” and un-disciplinary scholarly product. This short book never actually develops many of its themes, and the often fleeting references to other scholarship can be maddening for the reader. For example, in the four-page chapter “Social Support for Stalinism,” Gross speculates that those non-Jewish Poles who “had been compromised during the German occupation”⁹—that is, people such as those who had committed the Jedwabne murders—were more likely to become part of the postwar Communist Party regime, but he offers no evidence for this speculation.

The urgency of tone and moral outrage, which enliven the text considerably, also lead Gross to make unsupported generalizations that not only oversimplify a complex reality but may discourage the reader from seeking further information. For example, he writes that “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

8. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, 2001).

9. Gross, *Neighbors*, 164.

they could.”¹⁰ This assertion—while literally accurate—nevertheless obscures the fact that some Jews who had spent the war in the Soviet Union or in hiding returned to their homes after the war, often to face the resentment of and harassment by their former neighbors, further expropriation of their property, and, in the cases of Kraków and Kielce, violent pogroms that Gross discusses earlier in the book.

Neighbors has generated a range of deeply emotional responses by Polish politicians, academics, activists, clergy, and “average” people on the street, and its publication has precipitated a crisis in popular and scholarly understandings of Polish national identity. Many people inside and outside Poland had an awareness of events like Jedwabne, or perhaps knew about Jedwabne itself, before Gross’s text was published. Like the awareness of whites in the United States that many portions of American cities and towns—and indeed the U.S. Capitol—were built by slaves, or that lynch mobs in the 1950s appropriated the land of the blacks they killed, this knowledge was somehow passive, part of “history” and thus not relevant to present-day cultural consciousness. The achievement of *Neighbors* is that it propels the experience of the Jews and the Catholics of Jedwabne into another kind of “knowing,” a potentially transformative one, in which a consideration of one’s own actions and one’s sense of community is informed by a painful yet honest assessment of the past and present influence of ethnic, racial, or religious identities, privileges, and motivations. This type of history fulfills its promise as one of our best tools for truth-telling and reflection on the relationship of self to community.

10. *Ibid.*, 167.