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A lethal homecoming

Fear Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz — An Essay in Historical Interpretation Jan T. Gross Random House: 304 pp., \$25.95

By Thane Rosenbaum

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June 25, 2006

FIRST, a confession. I am not indifferent to Poland. But for the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath, I would have undoubtedly been born a Polish son. Though a citizen of the United States, I consider myself a casualty of Poland — not one of its ghosts, of which there are millions, but one of its orphans, of which there are a sizable number as well.

Bringing these heartfelt feelings of loss and displacement to Jan T. Gross' "Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz — An Essay in Historical Interpretation" makes for an especially powerful and, yes, painful reading experience. Though gripping, the book is not a page turner. It's more like a literary exercise in wincing and squirming. Indeed, "Fear" succeeds precisely because of how well it disturbs. It is illuminating and searing, a moral indictment delivered with cool, lawyerly efficiency that pounds away at the conscience with the sledgehammer of a verdict.

"Fear" follows Gross' critically acclaimed 2002 book, "Neighbors," in which he examined the 1941 slaughter of the Jews of Jedwabne, Poland — a massacre committed by Poles that took place separate from the Holocaust and before the ovens of Auschwitz reached maximum intensity. With his latest book, Gross continues to direct the moral spotlight on Poland. Yet here, rather than focus on a village, "Fear" takes on an entire nation, forever depriving Poland of any false claims to the smug, easy virtue of an innocent bystander to Nazi atrocities. And the time frame for Gross' investigation is, paradoxically, after Auschwitz, when the reality of German crimes and Polish complicity was most indefensibly apparent.

Why paradoxically? Well, after all, the Holocaust was primarily a Polish tragedy. Poland had been the cradle of the Diaspora, the center of its religion, scholarship and art. And, most important, Poland was where most of the world's Jews lived. Though two-thirds of Europe's Jews perished during the Holocaust, Gross points out that the sacrifice in Poland was even larger, more than 90% of the country's Jews. Polish Jewry accounted for more than half of the Holocaust's 6 million Jewish victims. If you were Polish and Jewish, by the war's end, you were most likely dead.

Though Poland's credentials as one of Nazism's chief victims are legendary, the country's Holocaust past, specifically its relationship to the fate of Polish Jewry, is more slippery. When it comes to moral condemnation, Poland is generally treated only as the crime scene. It supplied the real estate for all those death camps and most of its victims, but the murder machinery that plowed through Poland was definitely German-made.

Gross' "Fear," however, isolates a startling postwar paradox: Within two years of the liberation of Auschwitz, whatever tiny remnants of Polish Jewry that had managed to survive were either killed or forced to flee. These finishing touches on the Final Solution were not perpetrated by Nazis. Instead, they came at the brutal hands of former Polish neighbors.

Gross is quick to identify the moral implications of this Polish phenomenon. As a nation, the Poles suffered tremendous losses during the Nazi occupation. Several million Polish Christians were killed, separate from the country's 3.2 million Jewish dead in the Holocaust (although the Poles were predominantly casualties of war, not victims of genocide). Poland was not a collaborationist nation in any conventional sense. Indeed, Poles heroically resisted the Germans, and, although statistically unimpressive, some did righteously save the lives of Jews. Yet, as "Fear" alleges, there was great collusion and shared interests between Nazis and Poles when it came to Jews. Poles actively and exuberantly applauded what the Germans had in mind for the local Jewish population.

Given the suffering of the Poles, however, one would have imagined that Polish Christians would have treated the country's returning Jews — few as they were — with tremendous sympathy and compassion, welcoming them back with tearful expressions of neighborliness and solidarity. According to Gross, the opposite was the case, and Polish intellectuals and elites were dumbfounded by the vile anti-Semitic attitudes of Poland's majority underclass. Pogroms occurred. "Fear" reads like a barbaric nightmare, except that the Jews had barely yet awoken from Auschwitz, a far more horrific and unimaginable dream. The sensory overload of inhumanity must have been psychologically catastrophic. Jews stumbled back into Poland's cities and towns like punch-drunk skeletons, only to experience more beatings and death.

Jews were chased, murdered and robbed by their neighbors, tossed off trains and looted, clubbed over the head with iron bars. Polish Boy Scouts were recruited to find Jews, whereupon Poland became a shooting gallery with Holocaust survivors as targets. Jewish children who had been given to Poles for safekeeping were not returned to their parents or relatives. Jewish property claims were denied. Their neighbors were no longer neighbors; they had moved in and taken over.

Ground zero for this menacing display of Polish vigilantism was the Kielce pogrom, in July 1946. A Christian boy who went off to pick cherries was reported as being kidnapped by Jews and stashed away in a synagogue basement. The fact that the boy recanted his story and that the synagogue had no basement was immaterial. The mere rumor of an attempted ritual murder was enough. A Polish mob, assisted by local police and the occupying Soviet army, dragged the town's Jews out onto the streets, killed them and then plundered their possessions.

There is bone-chilling normality to Gross' account of the Kielce pogrom. It erupted as a spontaneous crime spree and shakedown, and yet it happened in broad daylight, with great acquiescence and unanimity, as if Poland had been in rehearsal for centuries. The events of that day hover over the book like a black cloud of emotional and moral detachment. The killing and looting of Jewish neighbors was done openly, deliberately and without regret; as Gross points out, even today, the Poles who witnessed what happened in Kielce are stunningly unrepentant.

How did this happen?

Gross debunks the postwar Polish myths about why the Jews deserved their fate. Jews never kidnapped Christian children, or, for example, used Christian blood for the making of matzo. Jews were not responsible for bringing Communism to Poland, nor were they Communist party leaders. The fact is, hardly any Polish Jews survived the Holocaust. And those who had survived were too psychologically damaged and physically wretched to pose a threat to anything except perhaps to someone's guilty conscience. Moreover, Jews did not possess wealth that would have inspired resentment. Whatever wealth they once had was now in the possession of Poles. And that, according to Gross, was the problem.

The annihilation of Polish Jewry resulted in the immediate upward social mobility of Polish Christians. Hitler

delivered a devastating blow to Polish nationalism, but a secondary effect of his racial rampage gave an artificial boost to the self-esteem of the Polish peasantry. They emerged from the Holocaust as a nouveau middle-class, a post-atrocity artifact of spoliation and unjust enrichment. And they weren't about to return either their ill-gotten gains or their newfound status. Nor did they wish to be reminded of what they had done. And the best way to avoid discomfort was to not have to look into the eyes of the neighbors they once betrayed.

Gross concludes that anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz has no historical antecedent. Yes, Polish-Jewish relations have been marked by casual, even fashionable anti-Semitism. But according to Gross, the postwar variety is different. After Auschwitz, anti-Semitism was motivated by fear. But this time it was the Poles who feared the Jews. They feared them not because of their strength, wealth, cunning or even their God: What scared them was that they were still alive, that a fraction were able to return and point a finger of accusation or try to reclaim what was rightfully theirs. So, according to Gross, to cope with reverse guilt and as a coda to the Nazis, Poles killed 1,500 more Jews over the next two years as a twisted expression of collective shame. And, even then, the fear remained.

The Holocaust is ultimately a ghost story, and Poles have many reasons to be haunted. Theirs is a nation cursed by absence. Gross' "Fear" should inspire a national reflection on why there are scarcely any Jews left in Poland. It's never too late to mourn. The soul of the country depends on it. •

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