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The Killing After The Killing

Reviewed by Elie Wiesel
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FEAR

Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz

By Jan T. Gross

Random House. 304 pp. \$25.95

In 1996, Poland's prime minister, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, invited a Jewish American writer to speak at a commemoration marking the 50th anniversary of the Kielce pogrom. The speaker reminded his listeners that if Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek and Sobibor were German initiatives, the killers this time on the ground were Polish, their language Polish and their hatred entirely Polish. He took advantage of the occasion to demand that the Polish government remove the crosses and other religious symbols that, by chance, he had seen a few years before strewn in the ashes at Birkenau, where almost all the burned dead had been Jews. The next day, virulent, deplorable -- essentially antisemitic -- attacks appeared throughout the Polish press.

I was that speaker.

Some time later, the great Israeli historian Israel Gutman spoke to me briefly about the Jedwabne pogrom, in which virtually all of that small Polish town's 1,600 Jewish residents were killed in a single day in July 1941, and a new and important book, *Neighbors*, by Jan T. Gross, whose revelations about Jedwabne promised to embarrass Poland and jolt the conscience of the world.

A professor at Princeton now, Gross is a Polish Jew who knows his subject. *Neighbors* -- a book of high moral quality -- described the massacre of Jews at Jedwabne as not carried out by Germans but by native Poles. Published in English in 2001, it had formidable impact in America and elsewhere.

One can easily predict a similar effect and success for his new work, *Fear*. You read it breathlessly, all human reason telling you it can't be so -- and the book culminates in so keen a shock that even a close student of the Jewish tragedy during World War II cannot fail to feel it.

Bitterness, envy, murderous rage: Everything that is low, primitive, vile and ugly in the human animal is laid bare and analyzed on these pages. Reading this book -- repugnant and revolting as it can be -- one is seized by an impulse to close it and say: No. It is not possible for so many human beings to have loosed their savage hounds on fellow human beings -- men, women, children, all of them innocent and defenseless in a place that was just waking from a long nightmare.

Fear is a word we use often in reference to dictatorships and totalitarian regimes; it is, for want of a better term, employed inadequately to speak of the Holocaust. In a dark time, on a continent overcome by the din of triumphant Nazism, fear gripped the occupied countries and all nations in Germany's shadow; but, mostly, fear gripped the Polish people, whom Hitler wanted reduced to slavery, and the Jewish people, singularly destined for isolation, humiliation and total extermination. Had these last two communities acted logically, they might have understood that they faced a

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common enemy and worked to combine their strengths to help each other. Unfortunately, that was not to be. Gross describes how Warsaw's onlookers watched young Jewish fighters throw themselves from burning windows during the pathetic yet glorious ghetto uprising in 1943, then applauded when German soldiers set upon them below.

But in this strongly sourced work, another fear emerges. It is that felt by Jews, not during Poland's occupation by the Nazis, but afterward, even as the country was being liberated by the Red Army.

Based on official documents as well as numerous testimonies, *Fear* recounts events as they unfolded in 1945-46. The most heinous and outrageous cruelties, it appears, were inflicted by civilians, soldiers and policemen on a benighted population of Jewish survivors from hells near and far, who were returning sick, poor, wounded -- orphans beyond hope.

To put it clearly: Like many of us, they had thought all too naively that antisemitism, discredited 6 million times over, had died at Auschwitz with its victims. They were wrong. Only the dead perished at Birkenau; antisemitism itself survived in most places, and mostly in Poland. This is, in sum, what Jan Gross reveals in a style that is at once sober and overwhelming in its very bluntness. There were manhunts, public humiliations, insane acts of brutality. The rare escapees who thought themselves fortunate to return home found their property occupied by strangers who chased them away with scornful cries: "What, you're still in this world?" Eventually, they were made to regret their very survival. Trapping a Jew was reason enough to beat him senseless. Discover another, and pelt him with stones.

This antisemitic blight, all too insidious and thorough, infected every level of the population. There were those who killed Jews in order to steal from them; others who coveted their stores and homes; others, to avenge the Jews' mythical power in communist secret circles; and then there were those who killed for the simple pleasure of it.

There was the official version: Authorities minimized the tragedy's Jewishness. Even as they commemorated the dead, they forgot to mention that they were Jews. And the public version: Jews were barred from civic life -- from schools as well as public office. Traditional antisemitism, too, lived on, fueled by ancient religious prejudices as well as individual and collective hatreds.

Then there were the pogroms. First in tiny villages, followed by those in the big cities. Gross's reader is suddenly thrust into the Middle Ages. In Krakow and in Kielce, those thirsting for Jewish blood didn't hesitate to maim or murder. In these two towns, it began with that old canard claiming that Jews slaughtered Christian children to use their blood for the ritual preparation of Passover matzos. In Kielce, it was rumored, Jews had lured a Polish boy into a cave so that they could murder him. Little did it matter that there was no cave in the local Jewish Committee's building at 7 Planty Street. Little did it matter that, for centuries, the highest authorities of the Catholic Church had repudiated and condemned these accusations as stupid and malicious lies. The Polish population clung to such myths to feed their hatred and rage against the Jews, who were guilty of nothing more than having survived Treblinka and Auschwitz. And more: The Polish clergy in towns and provinces, almost to the last man, chose to guard its silence.

As he has done for Jedwabne in *Neighbors*, Gross here shows the horror of Kielce in all its aspects. Hatred for Jews seemed to render the whole world blind. Old and young, men and women, soldiers and police -- even boy scouts -- took part in the lynchings. And spectators either applauded or did not care. How to explain so much hate, at so many levels? It is a question for the intellectuals as well as the politicians; neither could have predicted it. Gross quotes Tacitus, who once said, "It is indeed human nature to hate the man whom you have injured." Taking it one step further, the author posits that Polish antisemites detested their Jewish victims for their suffering, which caused such shame: "Jews were so frightening and dangerous, in other words, not because of what they had done or could do to the Poles, but because of what Poles had done to the Jews."

Does it follow that all of Poland was to blame? I do not believe in collective guilt. Only the guilty are guilty; their contemporaries are not. The children of killers are not killers but children. Today, a new generation will assume

responsibility for its history. And yet there is this: The past lives on in the present, impossible to forget. Jan Gross forces Poland to confront that past. Just as he forces his readers.

One of his saddest revelations? During the war, here and there, there were Polish citizens with generous and brave hearts who, risking life and liberty, hid and protected Jews. But rather than be proud of such acts, they preferred not to talk about them.

They were afraid of the anger and the recriminations from their neighbors. ?

Elie Wiesel won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. He is the author of more than 40 books, including "Night" and, most recently, "The Time of the Uprooted." This review was written in French and translated by Marie Arana.

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