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Jan Gross's Neighbors Reflection

by Stephen Pierce

Neighbors by historian Jan Gross gives the audience an in-depth analysis of the pogrom atrocity that took place in the Nazi-occupied Polish town of Jedwabne on July 10, 1941. After being published in 2001, this book turned controversial due to Gross's revelation in his research that found it was the local Polish population of the town that committed the grisly murders of the Jewish community, not the Nazi soldiers who were in control of the territory. This paper will give a summary of the book, then talk about Gross's research that supports his claims, why his work is controversial, what effects it has on the world today, and why it should be required reading.

Gross first goes through the history of the area of Jedwabne before World War Two. He describes it as a small little woodland Polish town where Jews made up around 60% of the population in 1931.¹ Before the war the Jews primarily lived in harmony with its native Polish inhabitants, saying that there was some tension between the two groups, but most of the time they got along. Gross then goes through the brutal Soviet occupation from 1939 to 1941 and how that occupation led many Poles to believe that it was the Jews in the town who were collaborating with the Soviets imposing these severe laws (Gross lays out that these allegations are false). He goes through the Nazi occupation after they took the region back in 1941 and how the Polish residents of the town were planning revenge action against the Jews for alleged collaboration with the Soviets. This revenge operation was mainly orchestrated by the Mayor of Jedwabne, Marian Karolak, who Gross believes was the "the evil spirit of this tragedy."² Gross says that we still don't know if the original pogrom plan came from the Germans or the Polish. But he does provide some evidence that the Gestapo came before the pogrom commenced possibly influencing the Poles, but also believes that it was a part of a trend of pogroms that were taking place in different towns in Poland. Then on the morning of July 10th, 1941 all the Polish men were called into the city for a town hall. They ordered the Jews of the town to be at the public square for "cleaning duty."³ The men at the town hall acquired clubs, stones, whips and any weapons they could get their hands on to commence the slaughter the Jews at the square and plunder their homes. The mob forced the Jews to break up a statue of Lenin that was built when the Soviets occupied the area and made the local rabbi sing about how the "Jewish Bolsheviks" started the war.⁴ The Polish, after killing many of the Jews, forced the remaining ones into a barn that was then poured with kerosene. As a result, Gross estimates that around fifteen hundred people died in this pogrom. Gross, throughout this book gets testimonies, written journals, and interviews to piece together what happened that day. He then ends the book talking about some of his research gathering along with how victims can become victimizers.

Gross used multiple ways of collecting the research for this book. First, he talks about using the 1949 Łomża Trials records, which were conducted under the Stalinist People's

1 Gross, Jan Tomasz. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. London: Arrow Books, 2003. 35

2 Ibid. 73

3 Ibid. 91

4 Ibid. 98

Republic of Poland to investigate the tragedy. Gross as well used the writings of Szymon Wazersztajn who was a survivor of the attacks. He used interviews that Agnieszka Arnold did in her documentary, *Where Is My Older Brother Cain?* Finally, he interviews some former residents of the area. These were diverse ways of collecting research but were flawed in many ways. He first admits in his “Sources” chapter that Gross was unable to find German documentation of the Jedwabne pogrom which he states was the first kind of record he was trying to find because it was critical. He also talks about how during the Łomża Trials that many of the accused were tortured during interrogations. This messes the records up because the individuals under physical examination will say anything to get out of being punished. He refutes this by saying that it was not a political trial because Stalin’s regime was anti-Semitic as well during this period. During the trial additionally, none of the witnesses or the accused were asked about the plundering which is strange. Finally, he presents the evidence of many of the people he interviews that it was hard for them to see what was happening during the pogrom due to so many people rioting that it was tough to figure out all the details of the incident.

This book has become controversial due to Gross pointing out that regular Polish citizens were committing these acts of horror without the help of the Nazis. In fact, he points out that the Nazis actually liberated and restored order in these Polish towns. The one example that was truly astonishing was written by a Jew named Menachem Finkelsztajn who recorded a pogrom taking place in Radziłów, Poland three days before Jedwabne. Finkelsztajn writes, “What a terrible sight this presented can be gauged from the fact that the Germans stated that the Poles had gone overboard. The arrival of the Germans saved eighteen Jews who had managed to hide during the pogrom. There was an eight-year-old boy among them, who had already been buried, but who revived and dug himself out. . . . In this manner, the Jewish community in Radziłów was wiped off the face of the earth after five hundred years of existence. Together with the Jews everything Jewish was destroyed in the village as well: the study house, the synagogue, and the cemetery.”⁵ Gross then talked about how during the Jedwabne pogrom the Nazis did not do anything but take pictures and watch. Later in the aftermath of the pogrom, Karol Bardoń one of the accused murderers stated at the trial that Mayor Karolak was in the public square and the local German commander named Adamy shouted at the mayor for not burying the bodies. The Germans took control of the area and stopped the pogroms by the Poles. Making it safe for some of the Jews to return, the ones that survived returned to town but were ultimately forced by the Nazis to the ghetto in Łomża. These stories dispel the myth that Poland was innocent in its endeavors during the Holocaust shocking many Polish citizens.

Jan Gross does a great job in showing why this pogrom is an essential aspect of the Holocaust that needs to be taught at educational institutions. *Neighbors* needs to be required reading for high schools around the world. The reason being is that many Holocaust books talk about what the Nazis did in the concentration camps across Europe which is a story that needs to be told. Books like *Night*, *Diary of Anne Frank*, and *The Bookkeeper* are examples of mainstream publications that many high schoolers have to read. But the problem is that these books give the public a typical good versus evil story of the Holocaust. It creates the notion that once you put on the Nazi uniform, you’ve become subhuman, a monster, and makes the 1930’s

⁵ Ibid. 69

seems like an event in history that could never happen again. *Neighbors* gives the audience a very different narrative; Gross lays out that these atrocities were not committed by Nazi soldiers but by ordinary people, your neighbors. It indeed shows that this could happen anywhere, it does not have to be men in uniforms taking orders from an authority figure. Even if some of Gross's research is not a hundred percent correct when it comes to the exact number of Polish that committed these horrible acts of violence it does not matter; it just reinforces the idea that evil does not always show up with a swastika band around someone's arm. It is essential that the modern Polish government recognize their past atrocities and embrace their past mistakes just like Germany has. That is why Gross has the Abraham Lincoln quote at the beginning of the book that says, "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history."⁶

⁶ Ibid. 5

