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Jan T. Gross: Neighbors

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OUTLINE OF THE STORY

On January 8, 1949, in the small town of Jedwabne, some nineteen kilometers from Łomża in Poland's historical province of Mazowsze, security police detained fifteen men. We find their names in a memorandum ominously called *Raport likwidacyjny* (A liquidation report) among the so-called control-investigative files (*akta kontrolno-śledcze*) kept by the security police to monitor their own progress in each investigation.¹ Among the arrested, mostly small farmers and seasonal workers, there were two shoemakers, a mason, a carpenter, two locksmiths, a letter carrier, and a former town-hall receptionist. Some were family men (one a father of six children,

another of four), some still unattached. The youngest was twenty-seven years old, the oldest sixty-four. They were, to put it simply, a bunch of ordinary men.²

Jedwabne's inhabitants, at the time totaling about two thousand, must have been shocked by the simultaneous arrests of so many local residents.³ The wider public got a glimpse of the whole affair four months later, when, on May 16 and 17 in the District Court of Łomża, Bolesław Ramotowski and twenty-one codefendants were put on trial. The opening sentence of the indictment reads, "Jewish Historical Institute in Poland sent materials to the Ministry of Justice describing criminal activities of the inhabitants of Jedwabne who engaged in the murder of Jewish people, as stated in the testimony of Szmul Wazersztajn who witnessed the pogrom of the Jews."⁴

There are no records at the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) telling us how or when Wazersztajn's deposition was communicated to the prosecutor's office. On the basis of the court files, likewise, it is impossible to know, for example, when the prosecution was informed about what had happened in Jedwabne, and why the indictment was so long

delayed. The control-investigative files from the Łomża Security Office shed some light on the matter, but they are also inconclusive.⁵ In any case, Wasersztajn gave his testimony before the Jewish Historical Commission in Białystok on April 5, 1945. And this is what he said:

Before the war broke out, 1,600 Jews lived in Jedwabne, and only seven survived, saved by a Polish woman, Wyrzykowska, who lived in the vicinity.

On Monday evening, June 23, 1941, Germans entered the town. And as early as the 25th local bandits, from the Polish population, started an anti-Jewish pogrom. Two of those bandits, Borowski (Borowiuk?) Wacek with his brother Mietek, walked from one Jewish dwelling to another together with other bandits playing accordion and flute to drown the screams of Jewish women and children. I saw with my own eyes how those murderers killed Chajcia Wasersztajn, Jakub Kac, seventy-three years old, and Eliasz Krawiecki.

Jakub Kac they stoned to death with bricks. Krawiecki they knifed and then plucked his eyes and cut off his tongue. He suffered terribly for twelve hours before he gave up his soul.

On the same day I observed a horrible scene. Chaja Kubrzańska, twenty-eight years old, and Basia Binsztajn, twenty-six years old, both holding newborn babies, when they saw what was going on, they ran to a pond, in order to drown themselves with the children rather than fall into the hands of bandits. They put their children in the water and drowned them with their own hands: then Baśka Binsztajn jumped in and immediately went to the bottom, while Chaja Kubrzańska suffered for a couple of hours. Assembled hooligans made a spectacle of this. They advised her to lie face down in the water, so that she would drown faster. Finally, seeing that the children were already dead, she threw herself more energetically into the water and found her death too.

The next day a local priest intervened, explaining that they should stop the pogrom, and that German authorities would take care of things by themselves. This worked, and the pogrom was stopped. From this day on the local population no longer sold foodstuffs to Jews, which made their circumstances all the more difficult. In the meantime rumors spread that the Germans would issue an order that all the Jews be destroyed.

Such an order was issued by the Germans on July 10, 1941.

Even though the Germans gave the order, it was Polish hooligans who took it up and carried it out, using the most horrible methods. After various tortures and humiliations, they burned all the Jews in a barn. During the first pogrom and the later bloodbath the following outcasts distinguished themselves by their brutality: Szleziński, Karolak, Borowiuk (Borowski?) Mietek, Borowiuk (Borowski?) Wacław, Jermatowski, Ramutowski Bolek, Rogalski Bolek, Szelawa Stanisław, Szelawa Franciszek, Kozłowski Geniek, Trzaska, Tarnoczek Jerzyk, Ludański Jurek, Laciecz Czesław.

On the morning of July 10, 1941, eight gestapo men came to town and had a meeting with representatives of the town authorities. When the gestapo asked what their plans were with respect to the Jews, they said, unanimously, that all Jews must be killed. When the Germans proposed to leave one Jewish family from each profession, local carpenter Bronisław Szleziński, who was present, answered: We have enough of our own craftsmen, we have to destroy all the Jews, none should stay alive. Mayor Karolak and everybody else agreed with his words. For this purpose Szle-

ziński gave his own barn, which stood nearby.

After this meeting the bloodbath began.

Local hooligans armed themselves with axes, special clubs studded with nails, and other instruments of torture and destruction and chased all the Jews into the street. As the first victims of their devilish instincts they selected seventy-five of the youngest and healthiest Jews, whom they ordered to pick up a huge monument of Lenin that the Russians had erected in the center of town. It was impossibly heavy, but under a rain of horrible blows the Jews had to do it. While carrying the monument, they also had to sing until they brought it to the designated place. There, they were ordered to dig a hole and throw the monument in. Then these Jews were butchered to death and thrown into the same hole.

The other brutality was when the murderers ordered every Jew to dig a hole and bury all previously murdered Jews, and then those were killed and in turn buried by others. It is impossible to represent all the brutalities of the hooligans, and it is difficult to find in our history of suffering something similar.

Beards of old Jews were burned, newborn babies were killed at their mothers' breasts, people were beaten murderously and forced to sing and

dance. In the end they proceeded to the main action—the burning. The entire town was surrounded by guards so that nobody could escape; then Jews were ordered to line up in a column, four in a row, and the ninety-year-old rabbi and the shochet [Kosher butcher] were put in front, they were given a red banner, and all were ordered to sing and were chased into the barn. Hooligans bestially beat them up on the way. Near the gate a few hooligans were standing, playing various instruments in order to drown the screams of horrified victims. Some tried to defend themselves, but they were defenseless. Bloodied and wounded, they were pushed into the barn. Then the barn was doused with kerosene and lit, and the bandits went around to search Jewish homes, to look for the remaining sick and children. The sick people they found they carried to the barn themselves, and as for the little children, they roped a few together by their legs and carried them on their backs, then put them on pitchforks and threw them onto smoldering coals. After the fire they used axes to knock golden teeth from still not entirely decomposed bodies and in other ways violated the corpses of holy martyrs.⁶

While it is clear to a reader of Wasersztajn's deposition that Jews were annihilated in Jedwabne with particular cruelty, it is difficult at first to fully absorb the meaning of his testimony. And, in a way, I am not at all surprised that four years had elapsed between the time when he made his statement and the beginning of the Łomża trial. This is, more or less, the amount of time that elapsed between my discovery of Wasersztajn's testimony in JHI's archives and my grasp of its factuality. When in the autumn of 1998 I was asked to contribute an article to a Festschrift prepared for Professor Tomasz Strzembosz—a well-known historian who specialized in wartime history of the Białystok region—I decided to use the example of Jedwabne to describe how Polish neighbors mistreated their Jewish cocitizens. But I did not fully register then that after the series of killings and cruelties described by Wasersztajn, at the end of the day *all* the remaining Jews were actually burned alive in a barn (I must have read this as a hyperbolic trope, concluding that only some had been killed that way). A few months after I submitted my essay, I watched raw footage for the

documentary film *Where Is My Older Brother Cain?* made by Agnieszka Arnold, who, among other interlocutors, spoke with the daughter of Bronisław Śleszyński, and I realized that *Wasersztajn* has to be taken literally.

As the book had not yet been published, I wondered whether I should withdraw my chapter. However, I decided to leave the chapter unchanged, because one important aspect of the Jedwabne story concerns the slow dawning of Polish awareness of this horrendous crime. How did this event figure (or, rather, fail to figure) in the consciousness of historians of the war period—myself included? How did the population of Jedwabne live for three generations with the knowledge of these murders? How will the Polish citizenry process the revelation when it becomes public knowledge?⁷

In any case, once we realize that what seems inconceivable is precisely what happened, a historian soon discovers that the whole story is very well documented, that witnesses are still alive, and that the memory of this crime has been preserved in Jedwabne through the generations.