



Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland

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On a summer day in 1941 in Nazi-occupied Poland, half of the town of Jedwabne brutally murdered the other half: 1,600 men, women, and children—all but seven of the town's Jews. In this shocking and compelling study, historian Jan Gross pieces together eyewitness accounts as well as physical evidence into a comprehensive reconstruction of the horrific July day remembered well by locals but hidden to history. Revealing wider truths about Jewish-Polish relations, the Holocaust, and human responses to occupation and totalitarianism, Gross's investigation sheds light on how Jedwabne's Jews came to be murdered—not by faceless Nazis, but by people who knew them well.

Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland Details

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From Reader Review *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* for online ebook

Saul says

A totally fascinating book that shows every aspect of the perfect storm of circumstances that led a small town in the Lomza/Bialystock region to slaughter half its population (the Jewish half) in a single day in July of 1941. For years, it was believed that the Nazis perpetuated this slaughter, as is reported even in Martin Gilbert's famous HOLOCAUST history from the '80's. But it appears that they only watched as the villagers and others from nearby villages orchestrated and carried out the humiliation, torture, stoning, drowning, rape and (mostly) burning of nearly all of the town's 1,600 Jews. What set the stage for this? A mix of traditional anti-semitism, anti-Soviet fervor, SS occupation, unconfirmed rumors of collaboration between Jews and Soviets, real non-Jewish collaborators who wanted to hide their collaboration by making scapegoats of the Jews, lust for money and property, nationalism, base banditry, etc. Every one of these stones is turned over. Gross gets about as close as one can to understanding what is impossible to fully understand: how neighbors and former friends can so easily be turned into mass slaughterers. The atmosphere conveyed herein sounds more like Rwanda in 1994 than the traditional telling of the Holocaust, with its methodological killing systems. This is the world of pitchforks and scythes and primitive slaughter.

Jodi says

A largely unknown story about the anti-semitism that permeated Europe during WWII. Neighbors literally bludgeoned each other to death, corralled Jewish neighbors in a barn and burned them to death, and many other atrocities. The author examines what caused people to turn so violently and vehemently against their neighbors. I found this book disturbing, and fascinating. I also found many parallels between this situation and the Rwandan Genocide.

Esther says

This book is not intended to be edu-tainment such as Schindler's List or The Boy in the Striped Pajamas. This is not historical fiction or narrative non-fiction.

The author's objective is, using fact-based academic methodology, to expose the lie of conventional wisdom that in WWII the ordinary people Poland were forced by the Nazis to take part in the killing of Poland's Jews.

He takes one particularly horrific incident, the murder of the Jews of Jedwabne, and weaves together primary sources to show that the Catholic Polish residents of Jedwabne viciously murdered their Jewish neighbours with very little encouragement from their Nazi overseers.

The Nazi invasion of Poland, or 'liberation' from the Soviets as so many non-Jews seemed to consider it, gave the perpetrators the reassurance that their actions would not be punished but the initiative, the stimulus, the enthusiasm with which they undertook this pogrom was theirs alone. And it was not simply a desire to get rid of the Jews, to remove 'the other' from their town: they stationed guards around the town so that Jews could not escape.

In the space of one day they swept through the town killing the Jewish residents in cruel and violent ways

and when such methods were not deemed sufficiently efficient they locked the rest of the Jewish residents in a barn and burned them alive.

The author adds the minimum of narrative necessary to connect the various testimonies and offers little analysis or personal supposition as to the murderers' motivations. Greed, deeply-seated anti-Semitism and the need to blame the other seems to be the general conclusion. This is not particularly satisfying or specific but it is the truth as we can understand it from the sources provided. Any further exploration of this phenomenon would require the skills of a psychologist or a novelist and would lead us into the realms of conjecture and imagination.

Following the war the pogroms continued through Poland and the families that had protected Jews were persecuted. In addition to the ancient Semitic trope of blood libel was added resentment that the Jews had brought such shame on Poland, after all if there had been no Jews there would have been no Holocaust.

To be honest this was not news to me. As a Jew in Israel I have heard many times from Polish Holocaust survivors, include those from my husband's family, how their Polish neighbours were more than willing to lend the Nazis a helping hand in solving 'the Jewish Problem'.

However until this book and the contemporaneous documentaries produced on the subject it seems Poland was unwilling to face this aspect of their history and the rest of the world was willing to let them ignore it.

For me the unique value of this books is that it offers primary sources, witness testimonies and it forces us to examine the society in which we live where ordinary people can turn against their neighbours and kill 1600 men, women and children just because they can.

Nancy says

This is a true and terrifying book I did not want to read...but knew I should. The brief description of the book below is taken from the Princeton Review.

"One summer day in 1941, half of the Polish town of Jedwabne murdered the other half, 1,600 men, women, and children, all but seven of the town's Jews.

Jan Gross pieces together eyewitness accounts and other evidence into an engulfing reconstruction of the horrific July day remembered well by locals but forgotten by history.

It is a story of surprises: The newly occupying German army did not compel the massacre, and Jedwabne's Jews and Christians had previously enjoyed cordial relations. Jedwabne's Jews were clubbed, drowned, gutted, and burned not by faceless Nazis, but by people whose features and names they knew well: their former schoolmates and those who sold them food, bought their milk, and chatted with them in the street. As much as such a question can ever be answered, *Neighbors* tells us why."

I read this book more than a year ago and have not stopped thinking about it. It's not about what war does to people or what traumatic experience does to people. Ultimately it is not about Jews or Nazis or anti-semitism. It is simply about people and what they are capable of if given the opportunity.

The crushing truth of this story is that ordinary citizens killed 1600 of their neighbors simply because they could.

Jaycob says

My own family's link to this book: In 1941, my great-grandparents sent my grandfather's younger brother to stay with a family in Jedwabne, Poland, thinking it was safer there. They would later learn that my grandfather's little brother (my great-uncle, though it feels odd to say that given his death 40+ years before I was born) was packed into a barn along with many of the town's other Jews by the townspeople, who then set it on fire. Sadly, as my grandfather eventually became the sole surviving member of his family, this was the most detail and closure he ever received about any of his family members' deaths.

Reading a book dedicated to detailing the event in which a relative was murdered is a surreal experience. My grandfather is no longer alive today, and discussing what happened to him and his family was not an easy topic to broach when he was, so I only knew the broad facts of what happened to his brother. Hearing what shtetl life was like in such detail before the war and the witness testimonies of what happened during the pogrom itself was helpful in furthering my understanding of what life was like for my family. While difficult at times to read, I'm happy to have read it.

As the author says in the forward, this is not a book that will bring closure or any answers upon finishing it. Obviously not a pleasure read, but acts as a chronicle of a senseless act of history. I do not know of any other books published on this specific event, so this may be the best monument to the victims of Jedwabne that exists.

Sam says

Interesting in that it explores Polish anti-semitic action during WWII, which is often overlooked. But Gross' bias is quite evident, and even distracting to the story and understanding the history. His attempt to correct the omission of Polish complicity to "the final solution" oversteps its usefulness by misrepresenting in the other direction.

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

The Jewish population of the town of Jedwabne disappear...only 7 remain out of 1,600 men, women, and children. This is one of the most horrific books I have ever read.

Chris says

What makes people kill those they live next to? Not sure, but this book does a close up of the question.

Gross' book apparently raised quite a discussion in Poland. It is short and despite the subject matter, rather easy to read. It is as if Gross knows that if he goes too emotional, the reader will have to put the book down. The most haunting section is the last section which is simply pictures.

The book is important because it does showcase how history can be forgotten or overlooked. It also shows that our understanding of war isn't quite the way it should be.

Dallas says

I picked this up after reading a review of the new book *The Crime and The Silence* by Anna Bikont. Never heard about this episode before, so decided to read *Neighbors* first, since it appears to have been and continues to be quite the bombshell, and what inspired Bikont to write her book/investigation. *Neighbors* is less of a comprehensive narrative history and more of a historiography of how a horror gets told, covered up, silenced, questioned, and ultimately excavated. It's fairly short, covering only the most basic information to make the case for his historical argument for Polish responsibility. It's opened my eyes to how little I know about antisemitism in Eastern Europe, and unfortunately still thrives today.

Anne Daigler says

Gross is excellent in his research and presentation of this book about a small town where neighbors became enemies in Holocaust Poland. The psychology behind it all is incredible. I'm pretty much obsessed with anything to do with WWII and the Holocaust, and this book is different in that it is about ordinary non-Jewish civilians taking lives of their own Jewish neighbors. Horrifying and intriguing. A lot of controversy surrounds the book, but it is still probably one of the best on this subject matter that I have read.

Melody Boggs says

It's hard to process that, in such a slim volume, Jan T. Gross thoroughly debunks the myth of innocence, ignorance, and "forced" killings that so pervades public understanding of the Holocaust. But the author accomplishes it, weaving historical records with brief narration to give new meaning to the terms "perpetrator" and "collaborator." It's also a study on human motivation and how such mass murders can be abided in the face of that motivation. Gross' argument that half of the Jedwabne community murdered its Jewish half primarily for economic purposes is a strong one that is backed up by the evidence of not only this narrative but also of so many other studies like it, such as *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* by Gotz Aly.

More than anything, this book is so frighteningly human in its depravity, a notion that casual readers may not understand without emerging themselves into more Holocaust scholarship.

IAMLEGION says

This is not as incredible as it sounds. This Poland community turned in the favor of the Nazis, with the common man (your neighbor) jumping in to do their bidding against the Jews. This is a true story. A very quick read, but "a must" if you want to understand human behavior during the worst of times.

Betsy says

Very interesting, very sickening. Beware when picking this up - graphic and disturbing.

Side note: Jews living in Poland have recently told me that - while his facts are absolutely correct - they felt the book itself has given an overall inaccurate impression of Polish anti-Semitism and has implied that this continues, at the same level, today. That is, they felt it's not as primitive and prevalent and that this book has somehow supported that thought. I can see how it supports it but tried myself to read it as an isolated case study, too. Just interesting to think about Polish Jews and their issues with it.

Jay McCue says

I was completely blown away by this story. The fact that something as horrific as what this book describes happened is really terrible, but the fact that it was almost forgotten by history altogether is just another tragedy. This book provides a particular insight into the very worst that humanity is capable of. The author gives answers to the who, how, and why questions of this tragedy. Let more be aware of this story so that something like this can be avoided in the future and never repeated.

Elliot Ratzman says

What went wrong with Poland? The conventional story is that Poles were anti-Semitic because for them Jews ran Communism. When the Nazis invaded Poland, they were greeted as liberators. Gross argues this is not quite right. In 1941 the Catholic half of the town of Jedwabne murdered the Jewish half through obscene and proximate methods: decapitation, drowning, burning. Unlike the anonymity of death camp gas and the morally ambiguous role of soldiers 'doing their duty' these Poles were not compelled, yet they killed their own neighbors. Further, Polish rescuers were ostracized after the war; the only mass labor strike after the war was to support murderers of Jews, then standing trial by the Soviets. Polish society, even its historians, has been in denial for decades. What explains these inhumane attitudes? Gross offers some interesting suggestions, greed, the guilt of collaboration, residual pre-modern anti-Semitism. An excellent short work that amends our understanding of the Holocaust.
