

Epilogue

The debate sparked off by the publication of “Fear” by Jan Tomasz Gross was not the last episode in the series of public debates over Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust. Another one, although short, arose after the publication of an article entitled: “The Dark Continent: Hitler’s European Holocaust Helpers” in “Der Spiegel” in May 2009. The text concerned various forms of the complicity of European citizens in the extermination of Jews.⁸⁵⁴ The response it evoked in Poland was disproportionate to its content. It probably surprised not only the authors of the article, but all those who believed that after the Jedwabne debate and other discussions concerning the Polish-Jewish past, Poles had learnt a lesson. The most surprising element, however, was that the article, which provoked such an emotional reaction, did not add anything new to our knowledge about Polish complicity in the Holocaust. Moreover, Polish threads were few and mentioned only briefly; they were reduced to the problem of *szmalcowniki*, pogroms in 1941 (“Pogroms in Poland by local people against Jews in 1941”) and post-war murders of Jews, of which, according to “Der Spiegel”, there were “at least 600, and possibly even thousands of Holocaust survivors.” If the intention of the authors had been some special focus on Poland, they certainly could have written much more – and there would be more things to write about, as Poland had been the main area of the Holocaust. For instance, one could refer to recent publications of the Polish Centre of Holocaust Research, or examine the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute. Yet, the authors used only facts and events that had been already analysed by Polish historians in at least a few important publications.

Moreover, the article in “Der Spiegel” neither questioned nor extended prevailing knowledge of the attitudes of other European citizens who, individually or institutionally, aided the Nazis in their extermination plan. Also, it would be hard to disagree with the thesis of the article: that voluntary or forced collaboration indeed influenced the scale of the Nazi project. This, however, was not new information. As the historian and Holocaust expert Dariusz Liponka stated in his interview for “Gazeta Wyborcza”,⁸⁵⁵ the article did not provide any surprising or

854 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-dark-continent-hitler-s-european-holocaust-helpers-a-625824.html> ; the article was reprinted by a major Polish daily, see: “Gazeta Wyborcza” 22 V 2009.

855 See: M. Wojciechowski, *Niech IPN zostawi “Spiegla” w spokoju*, an interview with D. Libionka, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 22 V 2009.

controversial facts, with which many politicians and journalists agreed. In such a case, one might wonder what the debate was all about.

The key accusation against the authors was their alleged historical revisionism; in other words, the fact that they wanted to share German responsibility for the Holocaust with other European countries and nations to lighten their own burden. Moreover, the text was interpreted as an example of a certain tendency characteristic to the German way of thinking, speaking and writing about the World War II. This tendency manifested itself, for instance, in attempts to modify the roles they had been assigned and to make the perpetrators victims. Needless to say, Erika Steinbach's activity was first on the list of evidence that such a tendency existed. The list included also German cinematography (*Die Gustloff*, *March of Millions*, *A Woman in Berlin*), literature (e.g. Günter Grass) and the CDU/CSU resolution in May 2009 (just before the European Parliament elections), appealing for "international condemnation of Germans' post-World War II expulsion".

According to the journalist Piotr Semka, the "Der Spiegel" article confirmed the "deepest Polish fears about changes in German thinking about World War II", suggested that "the Nazis found European nations an equal partner in hatred towards Jews and desire to kill" and equalised "German architects and directors of murder and those who were forced or paid by Germans to murder".⁸⁵⁶ Piotr Semka was accompanied by the editor-in-chief of the national daily "Rzeczpospolita", Paweł Lisicki, who wrote in his blog that "Der Spiegel" wanted to rewrite history and the authors of the article did everything they could to ease the German burden.⁸⁵⁷

More journalists expressed their negative opinion about "The Dark Continent"; for example, Andrzej Talaga ("the article smartly effaces German responsibility")⁸⁵⁸ and many others – from "Rzeczpospolita", "Dziennik", "Polska", and, obviously, "Nasz Dziennik". Deputies and senators of the Law and Justice Party – Beata Kempa, Jan Ołdakowski and Arkadiusz Mularczyk at the top – shared their views. The chairman of the Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński, provocatively said that "we will soon pay compensation to Germans for soldiers who died in the Warsaw Uprising".⁸⁵⁹ Władysław Bartoszewski joined the group of the article's critics, saying it was a "blatant lie" and "nonsense not

856 P. Semka, "*Spiegel*" *pisze historie na nowo*, "Rzeczpospolita" 19 V 2009.

857 <http://blog.rp.pl/lisicki/2009/05/22/kto-byl-pomocnikiem-hitlera/> [accessed: 10 IX 2012]

858 A. Talaga, *Niemcy wymigują się z Holocaustu*, "Dziennik" 20 V 2009.

859 <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/160059,prezes-pis-jeszcze-bedziemy-placic-niemcom.html> [accessed: 10 IX 2012]

worth commenting on”.⁸⁶⁰ So did Szewach Weiss, according to whom Germans could not deal with “Cain’s stigma” on their foreheads and wanted to share it “with other nations”.⁸⁶¹

Considering the response to the article, one may conclude that its critics created their own reality that had little in common with the factual content of the text. The authors of “The Dark Continent” clearly and repeatedly pointed at the initiators, architects and main coordinators of the Holocaust. They wrote in black and white: “It’s completely undisputed that the Holocaust would never have happened without Hitler, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler and the many, many other Germans” and “Of course only Hitler and his entourage or the army could have stopped the Holocaust”.⁸⁶² There were more similar statements in the article. However, Piotr Semka found them purely “ritual”; similarly, Piotr Skwiecicki called them “a ritual safeguard.”⁸⁶³ What mattered for them were only the negative intentions ascribed to the authors.

The anti-Semitic campaign of March 1968 was the time when the most was said about Germans trying to efface their responsibility for the Holocaust and share it with Poles. Thus, the accusation was not new. Obviously, the content of press articles in 1968 and official statements made by communist dignitaries was very different to the responses to the “Der Spiegel” article. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that one German press article (in accordance with the facts) was enough to liven up certain narrations and introduce a state of emergency.

Certain responses to the article were linked to the role of “the fifth column”. “Gazeta Wyborcza” and the Civic Platform party were both accused by Jarosław Kaczyński of anti-Polish actions, e.g. defining Poles not as victims of Nazism, but the ones who collaborated with Germans.⁸⁶⁴ Alina Cała, a researcher connected with the Jewish Historical Institute, was also attached this role and her case is worth attention.

In an interview given by Alina Cała to “Rzeczpospolita” daily, the historian answered the question: “Are Poles co-responsible for the Holocaust” saying: “To some extent, yes. The reason was the pre-war anti-Semitism, which did not prepare them morally for what was going to happen during the Holocaust.” In

860 http://www.jewish.org.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2319&Itemid=57 [accessed: 12 IX 2012]

861 <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/309080.html> [accessed: 12 IX 2012]

862 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-dark-continent-hitler-s-european-holocaust-helpers-a-625824.html>

863 P. Skwieciński, *Wymazywanie niemieckich win*, “Rzeczpospolita” 20 V 2009.

864 <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/89744,kaczynski-wyborcza-popieraniemcow-i-po.html> [accessed: 12 IX 2012]

the later part of the interview, Cała explained in a sober way how the atmosphere created by the Polish national camp, overusing anti-Semitic slogans, the Catholic Church and Catholic magazines contributed to at least passivity and indifference of most Poles towards the Holocaust. Taking this context into account, Cała said that “in a sense” Poles were responsible for “the death of all – 3 million Jews”.⁸⁶⁵ Without going into details, I will only mention that Cała’s words are verified by the rich literature of the subject.

Yet, it is important to pay careful attention to the responses to the interview. Władysław Bartoszewski, in an interview for “Rzeczpospolita”, did not hide his indignation with Alina Cała’s words,⁸⁶⁶ the historian Piotr Gontarczyk, Ph.D, found her views “extremely leftist”,⁸⁶⁷ and the director of the Warsaw Uprising Museum, Jan Ołdakowski,⁸⁶⁸ spoke about his “fury” in reaction to Alina Cała’s “complete nonsense”. The archbishop Leszek Sławoj Głódź called Cała’s words a provocation and decided that the Catholic Church had clear conscience and “no fear of attacks”, adding: “if it goes any further, we may expect to hear that it was the Church that provoked the war.”⁸⁶⁹

The journalist Piotr Zaremba went even further. In his polemic with Alina Cała in “Dziennik” Zaremba, he agreed with some of Cała’s observations but he also completely misinterpreted the meaning of her words about murdering 3 million Jews and understood them literally. Hence, he deprived the historian’s words of many meaningful phrases, such as “in a sense” or “to some extent”, which would disable such a literal interpretation. What makes Zaremba’s article so distinctive, however, are the insinuations he included in it. The journalist stated openly that Alina Cała was a “bitter enemy of the Catholic Church”, legitimising his statement by referring to his own experience (“which I had an opportunity to learn personally”). He also wrote that “Mrs Cała, completely involuntarily, not being German, supported German desire to share their responsibility for the biggest tragedy of 20th century” and that she even “went further than German newspaper.”⁸⁷⁰

865 P. Zychowicz, *Polacy jako naród nie zdali egzaminu*, rozmowa z A. Całą, “Rzeczpospolita” 25 V 2009.

866 P. Zychowicz, *Wielu endeków pomagało Żydom*, rozmowa z W. Bartoszewskim, “Rzeczpospolita” 26 V 2009.

867 P. Gontarczyk, *Nonsensy, uproszczenia, konfabulacje*, “Rzeczpospolita” 27 V 2009.

868 <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/150447.polacy-zabijali-zydow-kosmiczne-bzdury.html> [accessed: 12 IX 2012]

869 <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/150407.glodz-polacy-katami-zydow-to-prowokacja.html> [accessed: 12 IX 2012]

870 <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/opinie/artykuly/150513.to-nie-polacy-wymordowali-zydow.html> [accessed: 12 IX 2012]

There was also the implicit message Zaremba provided in his article. He undermined the legitimacy of Alina Cała's words relating to the role of the Catholic Church in infecting the interwar society with anti-Semitism by suggesting that an anti-Catholic fanatic could not be objective in that case. That's not all. Let us imagine that following Piotr Zaremba, who eliminated the phrases "in a sense" and "to some extent" from Alina Cała's statement, one would eliminate the word "involuntarily" from his sentence about "supporting German desire". Considering that Cała works for Jewish Historical Institute, of which Piotr Zaremba informs in the first words of his paper, the accusation may sound familiar to the reader. Bearing in mind how, in March 1968, the authorities promoted the idea of Jewish conspiracy aimed at washing off German guilt and assigning co-responsibility for the Holocaust to Poles, the reader can wonder whether history is repeating itself.

There is yet another issue relating to the Polish debate over the article in "Der Spiegel" that is worth considering. The message of this article was completely ignored both in Poland and in the rest of Europe. Many comments and statements suggested that the Holocaust did not concern anyone else except Germans (the perpetrators) and Jews (the victims).

In other words, nothing has changed since the war when Poles and Jews were dying separately. Sławomir Mrożek wrote about it: "What was happening to Jews during the occupation did not arouse amusement in my surroundings; it aroused horror, but this was the horror that was incorporated into the general horror of the war and occupation. After all, what was happening between Germans and Jews was only an affair between Germans and Jews. Thus it was no business of ours."⁸⁷¹ This opinion illustrates why a shift in the way we think is required. Another reason are the disgraceful attitudes of Poles towards Jews during the war, which cannot be counterbalanced by the Polish Righteous Among the Nations or trees in Yad Vashem. The fear that the "guardian mole" from Czesław Miłosz's poem will count us "among the helpers of death: The uncircumcised" cannot block our speech. The phenomenon of SEP manifests itself today in statements that Germans should not publically speak about any complicity in the Holocaust other than their own because it is their problem. Does "Kain's stigma" really exclude the possibility of talking about the past, especially if those who talk are honest and do not attempt to hide their blame?

The article in "Der Spiegel" has clearly shown that the Holocaust was the experience of Europe in its entirety. Considering the Holocaust as involving only Germans and Jews removes a number of important issues from sight, for example the question as to what extent the pre-war European anti-Semitism made

871 S. Mrożek, *Nos*, "Kultura" 1984.

that Holocaust possible to conceive of and implement. In that civilised and modern Europe all safeguards failed, as did ethics and humanism. As Henryk Grynberg noted, “Europe has more murders on its conscience than the whole rest of the world. And the 20th century broke the records of all times. The European 20th century gave birth to Hitler. Only in Europe, brought up on an anti-Jewish myth, could consciences be so corrupted”.⁸⁷² Is this statement so different from the question asked by the historian Götz Aly in “Der Spiegel”? Can the Holocaust be explained only by relating it to German history? Europe after the Holocaust, the Europe of perpetrators, witnesses and bystanders, is certainly different. “To Europe – yes, but together with our dead” Maria Janion wrote.⁸⁷³ Jews are our dead and the dead of Europe. Perhaps this is how the “Der Spiegel” article should be interpreted, rather than striking a nationalistic note, suggesting that German revisionism is still alive and calling for the rejection of this apparent revisionism.

Less than two years had passed since the publication of the article in “Der Spiegel”, when in March 2011 a new book by Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross was released, entitled: “Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust”.⁸⁷⁴ Like “Fear”, it was published by the prestigious editorial house “Znak” and it also sparked off a debate. It had actually provoked a debate before the official premiere, as the authors decided to share a draft version with acquainted historians, sociologists and journalists; on the grapevine, it reached a number of other readers. Therefore, a public debate over the content of the book began even before the book reached bookstore shelves and everyone had a chance to read it. The discussion was held among the privileged few, or people who formulated their opinions on the basis of other people’s reviews: those who had actually read the book. This fact considerably influenced the course and temperature of the debate, which started to fade after the premiere of “Golden Harvest”.

It is impossible to make a thorough summary of “Golden Harvest”. In the most general terms, the book describes how European society, mainly Poles, financially benefited from the extermination of Jews. The authors focused on diverse methods of taking over Jewish property by ordinary people during the war – on blackmailing, theft, murders and on situations when local people reaped benefits at the expense of their Jewish neighbours who were taken to extermination camps. One part of the book describes the incidents of plundering

872 H. Grynberg, *Winię Europę*, “Res Publica Nowa” 2002, no 8, p. 6.

873 M. Janion, *Do Europy tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi*, Warszawa 2000.

874 J. T. Gross, I. G. Gross, *Złote żniwa. Rzecz o tym, co działo się na obrzeżach zagłady Żydów*, Kraków 2011.

former extermination camps (mostly Treblinka) and digging mass graves in search of valuables among the remains of victims of the Holocaust. A photograph depicting people who had been probably involved in such activity, and caught red-handed, was the direct impulse for the authors to write the book. The photograph was first published by “Gazeta Wyborcza” as an illustration to the article entitled “Gold Rush in Treblinka”, which described the above-mentioned activity.⁸⁷⁵ However, at the time, the article brought no controversy or doubts. Similarly, an article about the same problem by Martyna Rusiniak provoked no discussion.⁸⁷⁶ Digging through mass graves in Treblinka, however, was not the dominating thread of the book but only a particular example of the phenomenon that was the taking over the possessions of the Holocaust victims by Poles. The authors of “Golden Harvest” also brought up the subject of the murders of Jews, committed by people from Polish provinces, “at the peripheries of the Holocaust”.

Due to its subject, the book by Jan and Irena Gross had wide repercussions. Perhaps, however, controversies and emotions around the figure of Jan Tomasz Gross contributed even more to this fact. The debate included also two other publications but to a much lesser extent. These were books by Barbara Engelking⁸⁷⁷ and Jan Grabowski⁸⁷⁸, which concerned the so-called “third phase of the Holocaust”, after the liquidations of ghettos and the moving of Jews to extermination camps. This phase included hunting down and identifying Jews to the Nazis, or even murdering them. Both books were written by authors connected with the interdisciplinary Centre for Holocaust Research, which since 2003 has been gathering scholars who are endeavouring to make up for years of negligence and inattention paid to the subject. Results of their research are known to a narrow circle of experts and do not arouse wider interest. So far, none of the books published by the Centre has ever become a subject of public, common reflection, although almost all of them considerably extend our knowledge about the Holocaust, particularly about voluntary complicity of Poles. It is not surprising, since mainstream media neither noticed the books, nor considered them important. A pity, as they could have helped to introduce the thought into the social self-knowledge that blackmailing Jews who were hiding (*szmalcownictwo*) was not as marginal as it was claimed.

875 See: P. Głuchowski, M. Kowalski, *Gorączka złota w Treblince*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 7 I 2008.

876 M. Rusiniak, *Treblinka-Eldorado Podlasia?*, “Kwartalnik Historii Żydów” 2006, no. 2.

877 B. Engelking, *“Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień...” Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945*, Warszawa 2011.

878 J. Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942-1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu*, Warszawa 2011.

Therefore, it should be firmly stated that in the debate over “Golden Harvest”, Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski were the main experts, invited to most TV programmes and interviewed by national press. However, it is very likely that if it had not been for “Golden Harvest”, Engelking’s and Grabowski’s publications would not have been noticed and treated as complimenting the book of the Grosses. The media presented them as even more reliable and better documented than “Golden Harvest”. This fact is particularly worthy of attention if we remember how “Fear” was compared to Marek Jan Chodakiewicz’s “Po Zagładzie. Stosunki polsko-żydowskie 1944-1947” [After the Holocaust: Polish-Jewish Relations 1944-1947]. Chodakiewicz’s book, marked with the stamp of the Institute of National Remembrance, was then recommended as a reliable alternative to the unreliable “Fear”. In bookshop windows, the two books were often put next to each other as if they were a two-volume edition – obverse and reverse; truth and falsity. It is very likely that now “Golden Harvest” is placed on a bookstore shelf next to Engelking’s and Grabowski’s publications. Perhaps a new book by Marek J. Chodakiewicz about Poles saving Jews, with a meaningful title “Złote serca czy złote żniwa?”⁸⁷⁹ [“Golden Hearts or Golden Harvest?”] is also there. Polish Righteous or Polish murderers? Cannot these two histories coexist? Does one really exclude the other? Does the Polish language not include various words such as “szmalcownik”, denunciator, murderer, hero, the righteous?

Let us return to the public debate that related mostly to the book by the Grosses. Attitudes revealed during the debate confirm the previously noted observation about repeating patterns of discussion, opinions and stands. Yet another time, many positivist-oriented historians and journalists criticised the methodology of the authors and their selection of sources. This accusation seems ritual and Jan Tomasz Gross can probably be considered the most thoroughly investigated scholar in relation to his research tools. Naturally, not each and every remark about methodology should be interpreted as an attempt to invalidate the author’s findings, but it seems that such was the aim of most of the comments.

Another strategy to belittle or disparage the content of the book was providing detailed analyses of the photographs around which the narration of the book was constructed. A few different articles in the national press were published that cast doubt on Gross’s interpretation of the photographs. According to Gross, they depicted people digging mass graves in search of gold and other valua-

879 M. J. Chodakiewicz (ed.), *Złote serca, czy złote żniwa? Studia nad wojennymi losami Polaków i Żydów*, Wydawnictwo De Facto 2011.

bles.⁸⁸⁰ In the end, no evidence was found that could question this interpretation. No other alternative hypotheses about the time and place where the picture had been taken and the events it had depicted were confirmed. Even if they were, does it mean that the content of the book should be significantly modified? Analogically, did the publically encouraged exhumation in Jedwabne and its results undermine the content and meaning of “Neighbors”?

The debate over “Golden Harvest” included many more motives well known from previous debates, such as the accusation that the authors had made numerous generalisations or did not take social context into account: war and postwar demoralisation, decline of the prevailing social order, lack of authorities, backwardness, poverty and famine in the Polish countryside. The historians who agreed on it were e.g. Marcin Zaremba,⁸⁸¹ Bożena Szaynok⁸⁸² and Paweł Machcewicz,⁸⁸³ even if their attitudes to the book were different. In her polemics with Paweł Machcewicz, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir noted that “indescribable contempt lies in associating social origin and poverty with demoralisation; in thinking ‘he is poor, therefore he steals and kills’ (...) Murderers are sometimes born in poverty but not all the poor are murders. We must look for other explanations.”⁸⁸⁴

The Grosses were also accused of ignoring the subject of the Polish Righteous. Jan Tomasz Gross answered this accusation in person, explaining he had chosen another topic and arguing that authors writing about help given to Jews, including the aid provided by Żegota, had never been accused of being selective and neglecting the subject of murdering Jews.⁸⁸⁵ Another returning accusation was that Gross was a sociologist and not a historian, and that his book was not a reliable monograph but only a poor essay. Moreover, numerous debaters emphasised that Gross’s work did not add anything new but only quoted studies of other scholars, as Gross himself had never conducted any. However, there were also debaters who explained the content and meaning of “Golden Harvest” in

880 See: M. Majewski, P. Reszka, *Tajemnice starej fotografii*, “Rzeczpospolita” 22-23 I 2011; P. Głuchowski, M. Kowalski, *O czym mówi to zdjęcie*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 26 I 2011; M. Majewski, P. Reszka, *Tajemnica zdjęcia z Trebłinki*, “Uważam Rze” 2011, no. 4; M. Kącki, *Powiększenie. Nowe oblicze starego zdjęcia*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 12-13 III 2011; J. T. Gross, I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Złote żniwa. Zamieszanie wokół zdjęcia*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 26-27 III 2011.

881 See: M. Zaremba, *Biedni Polacy na żniwach*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 16-16 I 2011.

882 See: B. Szaynok, *U nas nie tak się umierało*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 2011, no. 14.

883 See: P. Machcewicz, *Historia zaangażowana*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 12-13 II 2011.

884 J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Historia jako księgowość kreatywna*, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/1956-historia-jako-ksiegowosc-kreatywna.html> [accessed: 22 VI 2012]

885 J. T. Gross, *Historia to nie księgowość*, “Więź” 2011, no. 8-9.

terms of the origin (Jewish roots) and personal experience of the author, including his emigration to the USA, which was supposed to emphasise his “strangeness”. Suffice to say that the historian Jan Żaryn, from the Institute of National Remembrance, argued that Gross’s books “fit into a trend in Jewish literature and historiography (mainly biographical, but also research), which is filled with deep hatred for Poles.”⁸⁸⁶ Władysław Bartoszewski emphasised that Gross was more a sociologist than a historian, that “as a writer he’s more American than Polish” and that he grew up in specific environment, learning the history of his mother, whose first husband had been denounced by a Polish neighbour and murdered in consequence. According to Bartoszewski, this fact, as well as the experience of anti-Semitism in 1968, when he was a young student, made him suffer from “great mental strain”. Don’t these interpretations sound familiar?

Some debaters expressed a rather Pharisaic concern about the possibility that the publication of “Golden Harvest” could cause anti-Semitism. Such fears were expressed e.g. by the aforementioned Władysław Bartoszewski in “Gość Niedzielny” and by Danuta Skóra, the director of “Znak” publishing house, who also, for some reason known only to herself, apologised to readers who felt offended by “Golden Harvest”. Why and how the book could cause anti-Semitism was not explained. It is certain that every publication or statement related to the difficult Polish-Jewish past makes us see that anti-Semitism does exist and allows anti-Semites to count their ranks. A repetitive rhetoric figure that appears in debates over Gross’s books is the persistent concern about evoking anti-Semitism and that the books are, in fact, the mirror that reflect these sentiments. Even if anti-Semitism exists, once it is asleep and hidden from sight it is not an eyesore.

The debaters once again divided into enlightened citizens, ready to deal with the difficult past, and suffering patriots, considering “Golden Harvest” as anti-Polonism or “intellectual rubbish” that is not worth a debate, as Reverend Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski called it. This polar division was described in “Więź” monthly. Michał Bilewicz wrote about leftist and rightist Poland, entrenched in their positions and no longer interested in arguing their case. In his opinion, until recently Poles had been willing to argue over the Jedwabne and Kielce pogroms, about their motives, and about the scale of Polish collaboration with the Nazis, but in the debate over “Golden Harvest” they only either accepted the brutal truth of their past or denied it. The debate on “Golden Harvest” – or rather lack of debate, indicates, according to Bilewicz, a wider process: decline in public debate in Poland and two differentiating Polish communities of memory: leftist

886 J. Żaryn, *Z daleka od Grossa*, “Więź” 2011, no. 7.

and rightist.”⁸⁸⁷ Similarly, Barbara Engelking noted that the whole discussion about the attitude to the past was about Poland’s way of being in the world – “anachronistic or modern, infantile or mature”.⁸⁸⁸ It is also difficult to avoid the impression that this short debate without internal momentum was once again imbued with nationalist spirit manifesting itself in its traditional and modernist version. Deputy Zbigniew Girzyński displayed the former, declaring in Tomasz Lis’ TV show that “Polish history and Poles can be proud of themselves”. The latter manifested itself in the mathematical calculations of victims and perpetrators and attempts to measure good and bad by percents. These discourses permeated, reinforced and complemented each other. Once again, nationalism implied a defensive stand and became a barrier to noticing universal meanings and problems in the content of “Golden Harvest”, such as the key question of appropriation and redistribution of the properties of the Holocaust victims. Although the scale, context and methods of this process were different, it occurred in many European countries during and after World War II. What was the Polish version of the process? The Grosses outlined it and pointed at key traits. Similar to Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, the authors paid attention to what was happening “at the peripheries of the Holocaust”: in the Polish countryside, hinterland, backwoods, where murders of Jews, differently motivated, were a gloomy commonness, fitted into the landscape. Most importantly, however, the debate sparked off by their book meant that our dictionary gained new terms such as “the peripheries of the Holocaust”, “third stage of the Holocaust”, “Judenjagd” or “human desert” – an ingenious and painful phrase coined by Charles Baudelaire and used by Barbara Engelking. Without these terms, it would be difficult to think, speak and write about the Holocaust, particularly about its Polish context.

The end of 2012 brought yet another scene of the debate around the difficult Polish-Jewish past, during which the above-mentioned terms were used and the publications of Jan Tomasz Gross and Jan Grabowski were cited again. This time, the catalyst for the discussion was the premiere of a film entitled “Pokłosie” [“Aftermath”] directed by Władysław Pasikowski. This famous Polish director was until then known for gangster or even thriller movies about tough guys. He was also famous for probably the most sexist dialogues in Polish cinematography and vulgar lines that still dwell in pop culture.

In his newest film, however, Pasikowski broached a completely different subject. Following the artistic language he had elaborated – thriller and western aesthetics – the director presented a story that on the one hand was modern, but

887 M. Bilewicz, *Niepokojąco spokojna debata*, “Więź” 2011, no. 7.

888 B. Engelking, *Polacy – gapie Zagłady*, “Więź” 2011, no. 8-9.

on the other, strongly inspired by the Jedwabne events described by Gross in “Neighbors”. The name of the town was never used in the film and one could assume it was just a village or little town at the cusp of the 20th and 21st century, where a dark secret is hidden about the murder of Jews committed by Polish neighbours during the occupation. One of the villagers, however, Józef Kalina (played by a popular Polish actor Maciej Stuhr) turns out to be brave and honest, and he decides to bring back the memory of murdered and absent Jews. On his own field, Kalina places Jewish gravestones (*Matzevot*), found in different parts of the village or bought from farmers, which after the war served e.g. as a building resource.⁸⁸⁹ Thus, he creates a symbolic Jewish cemetery. Due to his interest and particular “collector’s” passion, Kalina exposes himself to danger. The local community ostracises him and shows him hostility and hatred. The atmosphere becomes even tenser when Józef, together with his brother Franciszek, tries to find out what happened to Jewish villagers during the war. In the end, his unusual mission, investigation and revealing of the local “open secret” are severely punished. Kalina is murdered by his neighbours – crucified on a barn door.

This was only a laconic and fragmentary summary of the film, lacking nuances, details and interpretations of symbols the film included. Yet, it is enough to grasp the key content of the film that was not a factual reconstruction of what had happened “at the peripheries of the Holocaust”, including Jedwabne, but clear indication of the moral problem of Polish complicity in the Holocaust and its consequences. “Pokłosie” also showed the cost of breaking a local – and not only local – conspiracy of silence. Pasikowski’s picture touched a clearly a Polish-Polish problem rather than Polish-Jewish or Polish-German ones. Hence, there are no Germans in the movie and Jews appear only in one scene at the very end.

The film started a heated and fierce discussion that was held in national media for almost two months following the premiere. The film developed a controversial reputation even before its release. Władysław Pasikowski revealed that the idea to make it occurred to him after the debate over Jedwabne but the outline of the film, initially entitled “Kadisz”, did not at that point get financial support from the Polish Institute of Film Art. It was considered anti-Polish. Although another attempt by the director proved successful, the accusation of anti-Polonism returned with full force. Predictably, debaters took ritual positions well known from previous, similar debates, particularly the one initiated by the publication of “Neighbors” by Jan Tomasz Gross. Many of them interpreted

889 Łukasz Baksik’s exhibition in the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw entitled: “Macewy codziennego użytku” [“Matzevot for everyday use”] clearly shows how Jewish gravestones have been used in postwar Poland.

Pasikowski's film as a direct reference to the Jedwabne pogrom. Thus, the same accusations that had been once made against Gross (and which the author encountered after the release of each new book) were raised to Pasikowski. Moreover, a non-documentary film, based on original screenplay and not intended to reconstruct historical events (although consulted with historians), was evaluated with the use of methodological criteria of academic work.

Critics pointed out that Pasikowski presented an image of Polish countryside that was far from reality and highly stereotypical: villagers were depicted as always drunk, violent and anti-Semitic primitives. They also accused him of generalisations, simplifications and ignoring important contexts; of drawing a false and incomplete picture. The director was reproached with disregarding the heroic attitudes of Poles during the war and the key role of Germans in the Jedwabne pogrom. Most importantly, rightist (but not exclusively) journalists and historians pointed out that the film said nothing about the motives for the murder. According to these critics, the pogrom was revenge for the wrong done by the Red Army to Poles when they occupied a part of Polish lands after 17 September 1939. Thus, the topic of collaboration between Jews and communists returned with force, and strengthened mythological images of Jews building triumphant arches for the Red Army and welcoming them with bread and salt; of vindictive Jewish officers in the secret police and almighty Jewish commissioners.⁸⁹⁰ In short, one could observe the return of an explanation of the events of July 1941 as an act of vengeance.

Another returning motif was the fear of the opinion of western audiences ("What will they think of us abroad?"). A decade earlier, similar fears concerned "Neighbors". Although the form of transferring the horrible truth changed, oddly interpreted concern about Poland's good name remained the same, as well as the rule not to discuss the skeletons in one's closet with outsiders. Strong critics of the film emphasised that the government, which financially supported production, also funded negative PR for Poland: an anti-Polish movie with taxpayers' money. Those who wrote such words, and there were many of them, apparently disregarded the fact that the debate around the Jedwabne pogrom had met with a very positive reception outside Poland. Honest discussion about Poland's difficult past and a willingness to confess their sins against Jews gained general admiration and respect.

Naturally, there were many more objections to the film, relating to its artistic value, aesthetic convention and stylistic mistakes, which belittled the value and message of the movie. The final scene of the movie, in which the main

890 See: np. P. Zychowicz, *Polacy, Żydzi, kolaboracja, Holokaust*, "Uważam Rze" 19-25 XI 2012; P. Semka, *Kolejna przekroczona granica*, "Uważam Rze" 19-25 XI 2012.

character is crucified on a barn door, was regarded as particularly kitsch and it was analysed and interpreted differently, even by admirers of “Pokłosie”.

National Catholic media, particularly internet portals, also lynched the actor who played the leading part, Maciej Stuhr, who had until then been the darling of Polish audiences, known mostly for his comedic roles. The actor firmly defended the content and message of the film in all interviews he gave to press and television. Some critics believed it to be evidence of his anti-Polish attitude and Jewish origin and directed numerous accusations and invectives at him, including anti-Semitic phrases. In different circles, Maciej Stuhr transformed from the audience’s favourite to an object of open hatred. More moderate critics believed that he exceeded his professional role as an actor by playing a moralist and an educator and, according to them, it was the director, not Stuhr, who should be the advocate of his own film. Pasikowski, however, did not feel obliged to explain or defend his picture, which, according to him, should defend itself. Believing so and protecting his privacy (which he often emphasised) the director consequently refused to participate in television discussions about “Pokłosie”. His letter published by “Gazeta Wyborcza” explains the reasons behind this choice. In the letter, Pasikowski also defended Stuhr and anointed him in the role of the film’s advocate. The director suggested that all critical letters, invectives and imprecations should be addressed to him (not Stuhr) because he ignored them anyway.⁸⁹¹

The debate about “Pokłosie” also included affirmative reviews and statements. Most of them were published in “Gazeta Wyborcza”, but also: “Tygodnik Powszechny”, “Więź” monthly, the internet portal lewica.pl as well as “Dwutygodnik”, “Kultura Liberalna” and “Krytyka Polityczna”. An affirmative tone, however, does not exclude critical remarks relating to the content and construction of the film. The authors included criticism but from a completely different perspective. They did not look for historical inaccuracies because they did not interpret the film according to the factual order of events in Jedwabne – they even warned against such an interpretation. Considering the content of the film, they emphasised how deeply true it was and how strongly it was anchored in various examples of social attitudes. Most importantly, they did not share fears about how the film would be received abroad or its supposed anti-Polish tone. It is worth noticing that anti-Polonism was a constantly repeated accusation used also by those who did not see the film and openly declared that they had no intention to. One of them was Jarosław Kaczyński, the president of the Law and Justice party. On the contrary, some defenders of “Pokłosie” stressed that the film was actually pro-Polish as it followed the tradition of necessary, critical

891 W. Pasikowski, *Nie będę przeproszał za “Pokłosie”*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 19 XI 2012.

patriotism that is not based on blind apology and affirmation of national past but demands a critical approach.

Therefore, the debate over Pasikowski's film did not transform the repetitive scenario of arguments over Polish complicity in the Holocaust. It did not disturb old mechanisms or roles that were once assigned. It only cemented the division (described e.g. by the social psychologist Michał Bilewicz) between the liberal, leftist Poland, ready to face its difficult past and the rightist Poland – repressing this past in the name of sanctifying the Polish nation. This polarisation, naturally, includes numerous simplifications and generalisations but the core of it is noticeable.

Another observation by Bilewicz, however, does not apply to the debate over *Jedwabne*. In one of his articles, the psychologist claimed that Polish reactions to Gross's books exemplify the so-called sensitivity effect. It means that the same information that is critical to one's nation hurts much more when it is heard from the mouth of a stranger than from one's fellow citizen.⁸⁹² Admittedly, this theory was proved right during the debate over "Neighbors", "Fear" or "Golden Harvest". Many opponents of Gross called him an "American" or "Jewish" sociologist and emphasised his strangeness in various ways. Needless to say, evaluating his work in these categories is not only unproductive but also illustrates a fundamental malevolent intention to discredit the author by emphasising his 'foreignness'.

Władysław Pasikowski, however, is Polish through-and-through, permanently resident in the country by the Vistula and is a director who makes films about tough guys for tough guys. The sensitivity effect explains nothing, even if one linked the film directly to the "foreign" Gross and interpreted it as its screen version. This time, it was a one hundred percent Pole who told the story of a difficult past to his fellow citizens; it was him who brought them the mirror. He used the potential of mass media – a film screened all around Poland, which is soon going to be released on DVD and BLUERAY. He revealed our open secrets about murdering Jews, hiding these crimes and the negative attitude of the majority to those who decide to break the silence by representing them in a thriller-style film, addressed to a wider audience. Until then, knowledge had been accessible only to insiders and readers interested in professional literature published by the Centre for the Holocaust Research or the Jewish Historical Institute, everything was all right and the defenders of the nation could sleep peacefully – the influence of these publications is microscopic and does not reach social consciousness.

892 M. Bilewicz, *Efekt wrażliwości. Rabunek i ludobójstwo*, "Znak" 2011, no. 3.

Pasikowski disturbed their peace. He made the first decent film about the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust in the history of Polish cinema, without the figures of the Polish Righteous – crucial in Polish discourse, including cinematography, without balancing good and bad and, most importantly, without a preferential attitude. “Gross’s literature became widely available” – many participants in the debate on “Pokłosie” repeated, including Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski and other authors of important publications about Polish self-appointed participation in the Holocaust. Most importantly, the truth became widely available – the truth that lies in unmarked, shallow graves scattered around the country that hide the remains of Jews murdered by their Polish neighbours.⁸⁹³ This fact was the one that most scared declared critics of Pasikowski’s film and made them unleash an arsenal of charges against him. Paradoxically, however, their responses actually strengthened the credibility of the film and made them into involuntary protagonists who complemented the screenplay. The sensitivity effect worked but in a different way. Defenders of Poland’s good name, sensitive to everything that is said about Poles, stepped out against him because they were scared that a popular director, using mass media tools, expressed his opinion and said something people did not want hear.

Considering what has been already stated, it may be concluded that after years of silence and forgetting about the Holocaust, about the attitude of Polish bystanders and the Polish-Jewish past, the topic returned and became the subject of public reflection. As has been already noted, all the prevailing debates were held according to the same pattern and divided participants in a similar way. This regularity suggests that the patterns will repeat during future debates on the subject.

Why do Poles find it hard to agree on the Polish-Jewish past and refuse to let the subject be thoroughly examined? Prevailing debates or even mentions of these questions have demonstrated that the subject touches a sensitive sphere, starts defensive mechanisms and mobilises defenders of the national innocence paradigm. One of the most important reasons behind these reactions is certainly resistance to the adoption of previously repressed information. All the previous debates have revealed serious gaps and deformations in Polish national memory, which results from the processes of collective forgetting.

Nevertheless, these processes are not the only explanation of the fact that each and every attempt to examine the Polish-Jewish past initiates various defensive mechanisms. An additional barrier is certainly the Polish “innocence ob-

893 See: J. Grabowski, *Prawda leży w mogiłach*, “Więź” 2011, no. 8-9.

session”⁸⁹⁴ that manifests itself whenever facts colliding with the heroic and martyr vision of national history are revealed. The impossibility of overcoming this “obsession” significantly undermines all debates relating to Polish sins and omissions towards Jews.

This problem is even more complex and concerns important components of national identity. As one can easily notice, defenders of the national innocence paradigm, who immediately line up whenever the subject of the Polish-Jewish past appears in the centre of public debate, do it in the name of the offended and slandered nation. In the national-Catholic press, the word “nation” is written in capitals and “Polishness”, “fatherland” or “patriotism” are used as punctuation marks. Idealisation of the national community and belief in its innocence and uniqueness are constitutive elements of the mentality of parts of Polish society, and romantic, messianic myths organise their thoughts. These processes significantly limit the ability to notice and acknowledge Poland’s complex past, overshadow whatever demands condemnation, limit insight and make the past seem one-dimensional. Thus, the debates and conflicts over the Polish-Jewish past and memory have in fact concerned Polish identity. Those who argued were only Poles (not Poles and Jews) and the stake in this game of memory was mostly Polish identity, not some Polish-Jewish consensus.

There are also additional factors influencing the fact that examination and honest evaluation of the Polish-Jewish past faces serious resistance in Poland and evokes emotional responses. One of them is modern anti-Semitism, which is not only a margin of public life and does not result – as some people claim – from lack of education or rural/small town origin. Every discussion about the Polish-Jewish past wakes up anti-Semitic phobias. Anti-Semitic rhetoric, clichés and stories were in the very centre of the debates analysed in this book and they were used not only by journalists of marginal Catholic and nationalist magazines but also by the Polish elites. Although they differed in the level of literality and euphemism, the origin of the anti-Semitic matrix was the same. The heritage of the interwar nationalist camp, reanimated in the People’s Republic of Poland, has been constantly reproduced. Nationalist traditions are cultivated, and leading Polish politicians refer to them as their legacy. Thus, one can say that the Polish mentality has not been modernised and until it has, debates about the Polish-Jewish past will follow their prevailing course.

Another factor that hinders Poles in confessing their sins against Jews and acknowledging exceptionality of the Holocaust is “victimisation competition” between Poles and Jews. This competition determined the course of the debates,

894 The term was borrowed from an essay by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir. See: J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste*, Sejny 2004, s. 13-23.

particularly the conflicts over Auschwitz-Birkenau. Poles do not accept the image of World War II outside Poland, i.e. that it is perceived through the prism of the Holocaust. They believe that such an image obscures the uniqueness of their own suffering, which they cherish and hope the world will recognise. Thus, they refuse to acknowledge the distinctiveness of Jewish martyrdom, in fear that if they do, the memory of their own suffering will become secondary.⁸⁹⁵ Victimisation competition may explain why most Poles do not acknowledge Jews as main victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau and do not consider this place to be the symbol of the Holocaust. To some extent, this also explains why, during so many debates, particularly the one after publication of “Neighbors”, many participants decided to remind everyone about Polish martyrdom during the occupation, particularly about the suffering supposedly caused by Jews.

There are still two important questions to be asked at the end. Can the prevailing debates be regarded as an element of the process of the reconstruction of Polish memory of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations during the World War II? Have they provided a reason for moral cleansing? Undoubtedly, the debate over the Jedwabne pogrom was a chance to re-evaluate the past and for moral purification. It was the longest, deepest and most multi-threaded debate on the Polish-Jewish past of all. At the same time, it was the most difficult as it forced Poles to find themselves in the roles of perpetrators of one's own misery. Brave voices of critical self-reflection were, for the first time, not drowned out by defenders of the Polish reputation. This debate undoubtedly helped Poles to speak about their difficult past. Unfortunately, one cannot say the same about the debates over “Fear”, “Golden Harvest”, or the film “Pokłosie”. Aggressive responses were also present in the debate over the article in “Der Spiegel” about the various forms of complicity of European citizens in the extermination of Jews. Perhaps we need more time to frame certain events into national memory. Michał Bilewicz is right in saying that thanks to debates over Gross's books and without the awareness of agitated critics, the “sleepyhead effect” will start to work. This means that the key content of “Fear”, “Neighbors” and “Golden Harvest” will live their own lives, independently from their source, fading from our memory. Thus, if we are asked whether Poles murdered Jews in Jedwabne and other towns, whether they murdered them also after the war, we will give a positive answer that will not be anchored in Gross's books – maybe we will recall them after a moment of reflection. Poles, as Bilewicz shrewdly observed, “will need some more time to forget about the ‘vampire of historiography’; however, we can be almost certain that they will not forget the facts publicised by Gross as they expanded the Polish horizon of imagination about what was

895 Ireneusz Krzemiński's observation

possible during the Nazi occupation and during the postwar years". In this context, Gross's books should be appreciated as "a tool for mass dissemination of knowledge about history."⁸⁹⁶ "Pokoście" by Pasikowski also became such a tool.

The process of the reconstruction of Polish memory of the Holocaust has been developing for a relatively short time and it is impossible to catch up with this backlog quickly. Therefore, there are yet many issues that need national self-examination and drawing out of silence and oblivion. The Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust were usually analysed by referring to a very comfortable category of a bystander – one of the three attitudes distinguished by the historian Raul Hilberg.⁸⁹⁷ However, as Elżbieta Janicka notes, in the light of the knowledge that we have, the concept loses its relevance. Instead, she proposes to call this attitude an "insider participant observation". Referring to Hilberg, Janicka writes:

The perspective offered by the scholar is inadequate. Bystander? Neither "stander" nor "by". But we still lack the language to call this position – the position of Poles that certainly is not a position of a bystander. [...] Because we must ask: is an involved – literally and metaphorically – bystander still a bystander? The Polish position was not in the middle and it was not outside. Neither was it formalised in any way. Categories of participation or aid in a crime may seem – and I believe they do – too simple and too narrow at the same time. In other words: so simplistic that they "catch" only the most obvious and undisputed manifestations of the phenomenon. How should we classify the so-called indifference? I claim that due to previous "preparation", "introduction to the subject", "acquaintance", there was nothing of this sort. I would suggest the term "insider participant observation" for solely "participant observation" is too little. It would be conducted in thought, word, deed and omission. In this category – I believe – there is space for a multitude and nuance of manifestations.⁸⁹⁸

Increasingly often, constantly developed knowledge makes us sit on the side of those who have their complicity in the Holocaust. This way or another, the process of the reconstruction of the Polish memory of the Holocaust started. In 2003, the first Polish school textbook about the Holocaust was released and, in the same year in Warsaw, the Centre for the Holocaust was created in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. At the end of June 2007, in Muranów – a former Jewish district – the foundation act for the

896 See: M. Bilewicz, *Nie tylko o "Strachu". Psychologia potocznego rozumienia historii*, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały" 2008, no. 4, s. 524-526.

897 See: R. Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish catastrophe, 1933-1945*, Aaron Asher Books, NY, 1992

898 E. Janicka, *Mord rytualny z aryjskiego paragrafu. O książce Jana Tomasza Grossa "Strach. Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści"*, "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" 2008, no. 2.

Museum of the History of Polish Jews was laid. In spring 2013 there was an official opening. Certainly, these are symptoms of restoring the memory of former Polish citizens and the tragic reason for their absence. Let us hope that the memory of Polish Jews will not be limited only to the Holocaust. We still, however, have a lot of painful things to say about our attitudes to the Holocaust and Jews.