

Note: *The following article appeared this past summer in one of Poland's national newspapers, Gazeta Wyborcza, shortly after the 70th anniversary commemoration of the 1946 Kielce pogrom, site of the last Jewish pogrom in Europe, and shortly before the 75th anniversary commemoration of the 1941 Jedwabne massacre, where Christian Poles herded the town's Jewish population into a barn and burned it to the ground. What happened in Jedwabne and Kielce during and after WWII is the subject of intense current controversy in Poland, a controversy enflamed by the nationalist government's efforts, as the Polish Center for Holocaust Research recently noted, "to criminalize debates about the past." This article is an effort to reach beyond the rhetoric of both sides. Its aim is to recognize that the historical and psychological dimensions of what happened in one place—Kielce—applies to our comprehension of the events in the other and to all such events and places.*

Bogdan Białek, the author, is a resident of Kielce. Trained as a psychotherapist, Białek was an opposition activist during the communist era, a journalist in free Poland, and presently he is editor-in-chief of a popular psychology magazine, CHAKTERY. Białek founded the Jan Karski Society in Kielce in 2005, in honor of the Polish diplomat who, during World War II, attempted to inform an uncomprehending world of the impending Holocaust. The Society's mission, as is Białek's life work, is to create dialogue between religions and peoples and to understand and eradicate prejudice.

Cease murdering the dead.

...If you want the sound of them again,

Stop crying out...

Fragment of "Non gridate più" or "No More Crying Out"
by Giuseppe Ungaretti, translated by Jon Silkin

About Jedwabne:

We Need to Stop Screaming at Each Other

by Bogdan Białek

Gazeta Wyborcza daily, July 23, 2016

We, Poles, cannot bring ourselves to utter the word 'forgiveness'. We continue to weigh and measure relative guilt and to instruct others on what they should do with their conscience.

It was this past summer, at 7/9 Planty Street in Kielce, that we of the Jan Karski Society launched a permanent exhibition devoted to the Kielce pogrom, a tragedy suffered by a local community of Holocaust survivors, for whom that city turned out not to be a place of peace and security, but rather of death, pain, suffering and deep wounds.

The location of the exhibit is an obvious one: that is where 70 years ago a mob made up of ordinary people, men and women, workers, policemen and soldiers beat, tortured and killed for hours on end. The exhibition touches and leaves a deep impression on its visitors, mostly the inhabitants of Kielce. Presenting documents, such as photographs of the victims, photocopies of their post-mortem examinations, fragments from contemporary and later testimonies and depositions from pogrom eyewitnesses and participants, it also includes videotaped testimonies of three pogrom survivors. The visitors are offered a historical review of the Jewish presence in Kielce, a chronology of the Shoah in the city. Finally, we are guided through the details of the ultimate extinction of the remnant community, which included Auschwitz camp survivors.

We opened the exhibition on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the pogrom. The town's mayor, Wojciech Lubawski, and the bishop of Kielce, Jan Piotrowski, were in attendance. On the actual date of the pogrom's commemoration, Poland's president, Andrzej Duda, and his deputy prime minister, Piotr Gliński, visited the exhibition, leaving their inscriptions in the visitor book. Kielce is still the only city in Poland, (and for that matter in all of Central Europe), which speaks about its shameful past in an open way.

Let me describe the way we have arrived at this permanent exhibition, which is open to the public, and which operates with no armed security. 16 years ago, in 2000, a dozen or so of us met in front of the 7/9 Planty Street building, mainly people from outside Kielce, including print and TV journalists. We read out the names of all the pogrom victims, lighted 42 memorial candles and proceeded to the local Jewish cemetery, a total of 3,254 steps. A local journalist, Jerzy Daniel, noted at the time: "It was a march of remorse. There were not that many Kielce inhabitants who participated, but that was not so important. (...) What counts is that the march was held. Only a while ago, the very thought that people would walk the streets of this city to commemorate the one universally known event of its history seemed audacious in the extreme and totally unrealistic. Decades needed to pass since July 4th, 1946,

before those murdered in Kielce on that day could re-join us to claim out loud their right to remembrance.”

From year to year there have been more of us; this year more than 300. Meanwhile, we have erected monuments, among them a memorial stone to the pogrom victims, with an inscription that states the manner of their death and cites all of their names. We have held numerous conferences, seminars, meetings and debates, such as the one on the occasion of the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’s book “Fear,” about the Kielce pogrom.¹

We have experienced acts of honest remorse and of deep reconciliation in Kielce. These stories are related in a recent, independently produced documentary entitled “Bogdan’s Journey.” It was filmed over a ten-year period by Lawrence Loewinger, an older Jewish American from New York, and Michał Jaskulski, a young Catholic Pole from Warsaw. After a screening at the POLIN Museum in Warsaw, Zbigniew Nosowski, the editor-in-chief of *Wież* (*Bonds*, a Catholic quarterly), wrote that “for many Jews, Kielce had become the obvious symbol of Polish hatred. Yet, the local work on memory on the 1946 pogrom has become the single greatest Polish achievement in Polish-Jewish relations. (...) The current debate in Poland surrounding historical politics highlights the contrast between the supposed previous ‘education in shame’ [where learning about history meant acknowledging guilt] and the new ‘education in pride’ [where history is employed to reinforce a nationalist narrative, to inspire national pride and patriotism]. The effective work on memory carried out in Kielce avoids this categorization completely. Education in conscience counsels us that the crucial aspect of our reaction to such events, like the Kielce pogrom, is not what the world will think of us, but what we think of ourselves when we look truth in the eye.” Yet the film did not provoke any debate on reconciliation or forgiving. Why?

Most likely because the Polish debate surrounding Jedwabne and Kielce has been mainly about apportioning guilt: the opponents, who are conservative Catholics, take up the problem of responsibility with gusto, seeking answers to such questions as: who is guilty and who is not, and who is more guilty and who less so. Also, possibly because some of the participants have been availing themselves, all too directly, of “moral outsourcing” of sorts, they are categorical about telling others what they should do with their conscience, while calling for public atonement. That way they preserve their own conscience in an untouched state. And maybe, as a means of furthering their own agendas and pigeonholing their political opponents, politicians were quick to exploit the discussion around the heinous acts committed by Poles.

¹ The historian, Jan Tomasz Gross, mentioned here is the author of landmark books, *NEIGHBORS*, on the Jedwabne massacre, and *FEAR*, on anti-Semitism in post-war Poland, whose center piece is the Kielce pogrom. Each, upon its release in Poland, has created a firestorm of controversy.

And still, it may be because reconciliation is something we cannot find in ourselves. For many of us the word 'forgiving' smacks of defeatism and weakness, even if it involves forgiving ourselves. And maybe because what continues to prevail over the graves of the murdered Jews, those known and unknown, is clamor and fury. Isn't it time to stop screaming at each other?

In contemporary Kielce we first have to ask ourselves whether this decades-old story in any way concerns us; what it means to us; what is our attitude toward it; whether it could be a personal experience for us; and whether we can derive some personal norm from that experience and our reflections on it. Finally, what are we responsible for, and to what extent we are responsible for others: for those who lived and died decades ago and who will mostly remain anonymous to us, and for our contemporaries, those living next to us? What practical conclusion comes from all this?

In Kielce we had to accept that not everyone had to share our views or opinions, to follow the same train of thought: that we had differing opinions on the causation and the commission of the crime, and that we had the right to them. In the end, we all agreed on two counts.

First, we do not want a similar tragedy to ever happen again for any reason. We all desire that no one lose his or her life as a result of hatred or political calculation, ignorance or superstition, and that no one should be ever hurt because of their language, skin color or religion. No acts of violence informed by such motives have been registered in Kielce for years now.

In the course of one of the marches, a young man slowed down his car and shouted to the front of the group, mostly men in yarmulkes: "Don't afraid of us. You are in your city, you have the right to be here". And he drove away.

Compassion for the victims is our second meeting point. One of those who participated in the many marches I organized over the years was an elderly priest from Kielce, who, until his dying day, was convinced of Soviet instigation of the Kielce pogrom. He always bowed down with deep emotion at the victims' burial site. Initially unsympathetic to him, I ultimately learned to respect him and trust his authenticity. He believed in the innocence of his Polish brothers and sisters, as truly as he was moved by the tragedy of the Jews – though he had a rather low opinion of the latter, formed by years of the Church's teachings against the Jewish religion, which was abandoned only after the decree of the 2nd Vatican Council, *Nostra aetate*.

When participating in a commemoration ceremony in Jedwabne some years ago, I commented to the provincial authorities on the size of the police presence there, separating the locals from those out-of-town participants who were honoring the memory of those murdered in the Jedwabne barn.

Nowadays, there is only one police squad, but is even that necessary? In that way the first step was taken. The next one requires that the inhabitants of Jedwabne receive a clear message that they are not the ones liable for the crime of 1941. This liability is solely that of the perpetrators, only them, whoever they were. The third step would require the inhabitants of Jedwabne to show respect and compassion for the victims. This is irrespective of who made the victims suffer in such a monstrous and rationally unfathomable way, this in the name of their humanity, of their Christianity and of their regard for patriotic values. That is the way to the heart. That is what we need here: heart, a living, beating heart.

Before the concert, which closed the events commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Kielce pogrom, Bishop Mieczysław Cisło, the longstanding chairman of *the Committee for Dialogue with Judaism of the Polish Episcopate*, said that the Kielce pogrom would not have happened had the Catholic Church promulgated *Nostra aetate* before 1939.

When we state the question of who should face up to the Jedwabne tragedy (or rather to all such tragedies, including Jedwabne, Gniewczyna and others), there can only be one answer: the bishops, the priests and all the people of God, not just the local community.

The crime committed in Jedwabne was an attack not only on the immediate victims, their relations and the Jewish community in Poland and throughout the world, but also on the entire (including the local) community of Poles and the entire Polish Church. I agree with Jan Tomasz Gross when he says that crimes, such as those committed in Kielce and Jedwabne, burden the “collective biography” of all Poles, including those who do not identify themselves with the Church. I feel personally responsible for the memory of those murdered in Kielce though I was not born in this city, and the same holds true for those of Jedwabne and Gniewczyna: for the memory of all our dear murdered ones.

In the course of debates or rather feuds over Jedwabne and Kielce, we frequently hear an appeal to tell the “whole truth”, meaning that there were also Poles who saved Jews from German oppression. I can accept this call, but only with the following caveat: whenever we mention the Polish Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial, let us also tell the whole truth and speak of the crime of Jedwabne and the crime of Kielce. ²

² In Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, there is a site, labeled the Righteous Among Nations, devoted to honoring all individuals who saved Jewish lives during World War II.

The memory of our pride is flawed and falsified if free from the memory of our shame. As we have continually entangled the crimes of Jedwabne and Kielce in politics, so we have entangled in politics the Righteous Among the Nations, who often saved lives not in the name of any ideology, but rather from the depths of their humanity and very often Christianity.

The murderers were also rarely guided by any ideology, but rather by what degrades men the most--by their hatred, hostility, greed and readiness to take revenge for alleged wrongs. We all need to learn how to properly remember both these groups with an understanding of human nature, of ourselves, of our own limitations – and without the screaming.