

The following is a translation of the interview with Prof. Marek Jan Chodakiewicz published in *Najwyższy Czas!* Online (www.nczas.com)

Gross Versus the Truth

An interview with Prof. Marek Jan Chodakiewicz discussing the new Jan Tomasz Gross's book "Fear."

Gross's book in some ways resembles the Loch Ness monster: everybody is talking about it, but nobody has seen it. In Poland, nobody has read the book yet, but the discussion has already started. You know not only the book itself, but the surroundings in which it originated.

- "Fear" is a continuation of "Neighbours" and an earlier book "Upiorna Dekada." The last one was too abstract for the Polish intelligentsia, therefore the shock therapy was needed in the form of "Neighbours." "Fear" is another step in that direction, based mainly on the Kielce Pogrom. Similar to the earlier works, "Fear" is an intellectual explication of theories produced by amateur historians in the so called books of memories of specific towns and places (yizkor bukher).

In "Fear," Gross repeats his theory that the anti-Jewish pogroms in the post-war Poland were caused by the deeply rooted Polish anti-Semitism. What is the real story about the violence in the post-war Poland?

- The main victims of aggression were Christians. The aggressors were mainly the communists – the Soviets as well as the Polish perpetrators. Only between July 1944 and August 1948, the communist occupants killed between 20,000 and 50,000 Christians in the so called People's Poland (from the Bug River to the Oder River). The Soviets deported 100,000 people from that region to the Gulag. 10,000 of them were sentenced to death. In addition to that, another 10,000 people were killed (tortured, pacified, gang violence, etc). As argued by Maria Stanowska, there were 150,000 political prisoners in Poland between 1944 and 1956. People who were periodically imprisoned and released are not counted, even though it happened quite often, especially in the rural areas. In addition, 518,000 farmers were imprisoned because of their opposition to collectivization. There were about 300 concentration and forced labor camps in Poland, and at least quarter million people went through them, according to Tadeusz Wolsza. All that does not even include the most tragic statistics from the eastern Poland. Only in the Nowogrod area, between 1944 and 1947, the Soviets killed 3000 Home Army members (Armia Krajowa) and arrested 13,000 soldiers of the Polish Underground. Over 20,000 were deported to the Gulag, according to Henryk Pisunkowicz.

To summarize: during World War II, Poland went through an Apocalypse. She lost around 6 million citizens, out of which around 3 were Christians. After the

war a “small” Apocalypse took place. For the Christians, it was a continuation of mass murders, deportations, tortures, and other oppression that they experienced from Hitler and Stalin from September 1939. It lasted until 1956.

What about the Jews?

- Polish Jewry was almost entirely exterminated by the German National Socialists. From 2.8 to 3 million Polish Jews were killed (out of which 20,000-50,000 were killed by the Soviets). Only about 300,000 people survived, either people who escaped or were deported to the Gulag. Out of that, 50,000-100,000 were saved in Poland. Majority were hidden by the Christians, some were hiding on their own, and some, paradoxically, were saved by the concentration and forced labor camps.

What about the Jewish losses during the Soviet occupation of Poland?

- David Engel, an American genocide professor from New York University, argues that between September 1944 and September 1946, 327 Jews died in Poland. My research leads me to believe that there were more Jewish victims – between 400 and 700 people between July 1944 and January 1947. I published my numbers in my book “After the Holocaust: Jewish-Polish Conflict in the Wake of World War II” (New York and Boulder, Co.: Columbia University Press and East European Monographs, 2003). Prof. Jan Radzilowski wrote not so long ago that J.T. Gross rejects Engel’s numbers and completely ignores mine. He insists on using the number “around 1500” victims (pg.35).

Why?

- Because facts don’t fit with Gross’s theory. It has to be understood that Gross’s book “Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz” is sort of a reply to my book. Sort of, because Gross pretends that my research does not exist (he makes no references to “After the Holocaust...” in his bibliography). Also, he doesn’t disagree with the facts. He simply chooses to ignore them. At the same time, he tries to close all the doors that I have opened, promoting his own paradigm. Therefore, the argument we have here is not based on facts but rather paradigms. Mine is based on empirical research, exploration of archives, studying unknown sources and critical analysis. Gross’s paradigm, on the other hand, is based on postmodernist deviations, selective affirmation of messages that fit him, usually not coming from a legitimate source. This is called “cut-and-paste” history. You only take what matches the author’s theory.

What about the argument of the “historical Polish anti-Semitism” in “Fear”?

- In general you can say that Gross points out the “historical Polish anti-Semitism.” He condemns everything in “Polishness” that is not intellectually atheistic, communist, or socialist. So he denounced Christianity, and especially the Catholic patriarchs, as well as the average priests. He writes the “religious

veneer of the Polish clergy was thin, easily chipped away at by prejudice and greed they shared with the common folk" (pg. 261). He goes on, "This is a history book, not a moral tale, but since the Catholic Church's business is with the Ten Commandments, one can evaluate the deeds of its functionaries in the light of moral criteria without being inappropriately judgmental. It behooves us to note that unlike the intellectual elite of the nation, the institutional elite of the Catholic Church chose to completely ignore postwar anti-Semitism in Poland" (pg. 152). Gross also happily quotes an unidentified British diplomat, "The Polish clergy was so blatantly anti-Semitic" (pg. 140). This is how Adam Sapiela, August Hlond, Stefan Wyszyński and other church leaders were supposed to be. Naturally, the Holy Father Pious XII was just like that as well. Gross charges him with the "ritual murder," in a form of giving Jewish children the sacrament of baptism (pg. 162).

Other than the church, Gross condemns everything traditional, like the anti-communists, independence fighters, and even the scouts (pgs. 72, 110, 114, 137). Every institution that Poland is made out of is under fire. According to Gross, they are all soaked with anti-Semitism and evil, which surfaced during the widespread collaboration in the annihilation of the Jews as well as the anti-Jewish violence after 1944.

This total criticism of the traditional Polish elite is a result of an enormous attack on the ordinary Polish folk. It was the folk who murdered and robbed the Jews during the German occupation. But the intelligentsia, or the ethical-moral frames (Gross calls it Polish "moral economy" in a postmodernist way, pg. 252) in which the violence took place, were constructed and supported by the traditional elites. But the author explains that in the context of the Old Order, the murderers and robbers were the folk, the nation, and peasantry (the preferred term in "Fear" is "lower middle-class"). It was them, the average Poles, in terms of the traditionalist Catholic context, who were the murderers, the robbers, with the approval or with the indifference of the traditional elites. It happened during and after the war.

Does that mean that the Poles were collective killers?

- Yes and no. The active majority of Poles were. According to Gross, it was mainly the "lower middle-class" who did the killing and robbing, since they benefited the most from the extermination of the Jews. Many peasants during the war, according to Gross, murdered and robbed the Jews. Then, the murderers and robbers replaced the Jews in the economic functions, rising into the social spots previously held by the Jews. The peasant-murderer-robbers advanced to become "lower middle-class": small merchants, salespeople, and middlemen. Please notice the semantics here: "lower middle-class" is straight from the Marxist propaganda. Also, notice how peasant smugglers, who provided food for the people in the cities despite the German terror, become in Gross's eyes black characters. What about Christian smugglers who supplied the ghetto? They too, in some sense, took over the functions which the Germans took from

the Jews. Should they be condemned? In any case, an active "majority of the Polish population" benefited by the Holocaust, because "broad strata of Polish society took advantage of Nazi policies and joined in the spoliation of their Jewish neighbors (pg. 260)." Overall, the average Poles are bad people.

Who is good then?

- The positive characters in Gross's book are the "cream of the Polish intelligentsia," which resisted the anti-Jewish violence (pg. 32). But also here Gross is very selective. He limits himself to praising Stalinists, socialists, progressives, and liberals. He praises the supporters of the communist occupation of Poland, as well as the collaborators of the Stalinist regime. Those are the people who write for "Kuznica," "Odrodzenie" ("Rebirth"), and "Tygodnik Powszechny" ("Popular Weekly"). Gross is very selective in terms of the human misery as well. Please notice how it doesn't bother him that the majority of the intelligentsia he praises were the supporters of the new system, and apologists of the communist terror, mass murders and oppressions performed by Stalin and the perpetrators. Even the least involved of those people were morally dwarfed, because they supported totalitarianism and became its important part. Propaganda was the main communication route from the Party to the people. So was there, in such a context, enough room for unauthorized moral action?

I've never heard of Stanislaw Ossowski, a sociologist praised by Gross, actively defending the victims of communism, tortured nationalists, oppressed landowners, or kidnapped LUDOWCOW in 1944-56. Collaborators, including the leftist Catholics, showed their second moral face by avoiding the topics of the victims of communism. Wojciech Klewiec used to call this "selective sensitivity." However, those so-called sensitive intellectuals actively eliminated "reactions" by the means of written or spoken word.

So those are the heroes Gross is talking about?

- Yes. This is an attempt to offer modern Polish intelligentsia a Faustian model: condemn the Polish folk, and especially cut yourself off from the Catholic Church, Christianity, patriotism, and tradition, reject the Old World Order, because all of this, according to Gross, was the cause of the anti-Jewish violence. If you do that you will be the only just ones, just like the Polish intellectuals who condemned the Kielce Pogrom, because they immediately recognized their "reactionary" roots: the Church, the Scouts, "Andersons," anti-communist rebels, and "lower middle-class." If you accept this extremist paradigm offered by Gross, you will be great, wonderful, and moral. You will be just like the Marxist publicists of "Kuznica," leftists editors of "Rebirth," and liberal Catholics of "Popular Weekly." These are the only just people in "Fear." And, following an old trick that relates to the vanity of the reader, those are the only people that Gross calls intelligentsia or intellectuals. Its like saying that being communist or collaborating with the Stalinist regime were the only predictor of a person's intellect.

How can a person reach such conclusions about the Polish intelligentsia?

- In part it is possible due to author's selection of sources. Poland was under communist terror and censorship (both intellectual and political), and practically nobody other than the leftists could openly express their views on any topics. You don't have to be a leftist or a liberal to condemn the Kielce Pogrom or any other such event. Therefore Gross creates false opinions of the post-war intelligentsia. Cut-and-paste history allows him to glorify only the leftist intellectuals. But it also exposes his lack of research. I have never found, in any underground newspaper of the time period, an article that would praise the Kielce Pogrom or any other mass murders on helpless Jewish population. Naturally, Gross ignores those sources, or he simply is not familiar with them. The results of this research will soon be published in a case study written by Wojciech Jerzy Muszynski and myself titled "Polska dla Polakow! Prasa Podziemia narodowego 1939-1949" ("Poland for Poles! The Underground Nationalist Newspapers 1939-49").

Therefore lack of knowledge about the sources, as well as selective use of sources negatively affects our ability to understand works such as "Fear." What else is to say about Gross's method?

- The general lack of knowledge of an average person gives Gross an advantage. It applies to Poland, but mainly the United States. In "Fear" Gross does two things. First, he rehashes the Stalinist propaganda against "reaction" and "superstitions," by which he means traditional, religious, and patriotic Poland and Poles. Secondly, he dresses this Bolshevik propaganda in the postmodernist deconstruction clothes – scheme, discourse, intellectual system, where the old rules of Aristotle's logocentrism are nonexistent. To be direct – it is a paradigm that you don't have to research and you don't have to prove anything. It is enough that you – just like the supporter of moral relativism Michael Foucault – express your opinion, your feelings and set them against "power." Then a progressive and iconoclastic author can arise in the name of the "oppressed," he can expose, deconstruct, and abolish the secret structures of "power" – in this case the Catholic Church, Polish patriotism, and tradition. With this way, the author is liberating himself, the reader, and, retroactively, the victims and perpetrators of the "system," of the secret works of "power." After exposing the mechanisms of the "power," it can be replaced with a supposedly tolerant secular system.

This is one level of Gross's work – psychoanalytical, playing on peoples' subconsciousness. I'm emphasizing that this is an esoteric level. He will be understood by humanists, especially those educated in the west. He will be appreciated mainly by the people interested in postmodernism as well as people familiar with the forms of discourse that rule the American universities at this time.

What about the second level?

- On the second level, the author communicates with the reader in a direct way. The things he offers openly are supposed to be understood by an average person. In "Fear" Gross presents a thesis that post-war anti-Jewish violence was not only caused by the pre-war anti-Semitism. Post-war violence had three roots: massive cooperation with the Nazis during the extermination process, massive robbery of Jewish property after the extermination, and massive rising in social status of many members of the Polish folk, who took place of the exterminated Jews and became merchants, middlemen, etc. Also, an anti-Jewish bond developed between an active members of the Polish folk and communist rulers. The latter also were anti-Semitic, especially on the lower echelons. According to Gross, after the entrance of the Red Army in 1944, when the Jewish survivors came out of their hiding, and mainly came back from the Soviet Union, Poles felt a widespread fear. It was a fear for Holocaust, that the Polish faults will surface, that the Jews will try to claim their property, that the Jews will try to get their jobs back, reinstating the system of competition. This fear caused aggression towards Jews. Poles attacked them because they hated them for hurting them. It was a classic hatred towards the victim, a hatred that wounded the spiral of the anti-Jewish violence. That is why after the war Jews were leaving Poland (pgs. xiv, 164, 247-8,258). This is Gross's full thesis.

Gross even mentioned that he will not change his mind "until [somebody] offers an alternative explanation" (pg. 247). But we have offered those explanations many times in our previous works. Jews left Poland after the war because:

- ❖ They didn't want to live in a place that reminded them of mass murders of their families
- ❖ They feared World War III
- ❖ They wanted to fight for their new homeland – Israel
- ❖ They wanted to realize their pre-war dreams of emigrating to the west, mainly the United States
- ❖ They feared the violence in Poland that appeared in the context of pacifying the anti-communist uprising
- ❖ They feared the Soviet and communist rulers of Poland
- ❖ They opposed the communist rulers, and especially their attempts to take over their property as well as the official campaign against private businesses, which were persecuted as "speculation"
- ❖ They understood that the communists treat the Jewish community instrumentally; they don't want to guarantee security to the Jews, they 'support' them only as a part of the propaganda fight with "reaction"
- ❖ They were shocked that the majority of Poles don't understand the above, and that the welcome the returning Jews received was not warm, and in extreme cases violent

Those are the reasons for Jewish emigration after 1944.

You studied this period and wrote a book about it. Do you agree with Gross's theories regarding the Polish-Jewish relations and Polish anti-Semitism?

- I do not agree with his general paradigms, however I agree with some of his interpretations of facts. For example, I completely agree with him that the anti-Jewish sentiments in Poland, even in the forms of pogroms, are absolutely incomparable to the extermination oriented German anti-Semitism.

I wrote extensively on the Jewish history in Poland in the XX century. In America, I published "After the Holocaust" as well as "The Massacre in Jedwabne, July 10, 1941: Before, During, After" (New York and Boulder, Co., Columbia University Press and East European Monographs, 2005). In Poland, two of my works were published: "Jews and Poles, 1918-1955: Coexistence, Destruction, Communism" (Warsaw, Fronda, 2000), which I finished in 1999 and which was the first monograph to touch upon the case of Jedwabne. The second publication was "Ejszyki: Kulisy zajsc, epilog stosunkow polsko zydzowskich na kresach, 1944-45", two volumes (Warsaw, Fronda, 2002). It's a micro study of the events in Ejszyski, where the National Army (AK) supposedly organized a pogrom on the Jews after the Soviets returned to the Nowogrodzczyzna. Studies have shown that the event was directed towards NKWD, and couple of Jews lost their life accidentally. Both works sold well in the conservative spheres, but the mainstream academic spheres consistently ignored them. That's why the liberals running IPN at the time were completely unprepared to handle the Jedwabne case. Similar was the case with Polish intelligentsia. As stated recently by Ryszard Tyndorf, "they don't know the facts, and they don't have the intellectual ammunition to handle cases like that."

Are you trying to say that we are not ready to handle "Neighbors" and "Fear"?

- Exactly. And because of that the majority of historians in Poland accepted the extreme interpretations of Jedwabne that Gross provides. They were not able to research the topic deeply and draw their own conclusions. So they simply signed their name under the paradigm that was popular in the West for a while, which Gross introduced in Poland.

It can be compared to Pavlov's dog's reaction. You have to remember that Polish intelligentsia emerged from a total intellectual desert – Communist Poland. All you could do there was to negate the lies of the propaganda. But negating the false doesn't make the truth, but rather a modified version of the false. The intelligentsia did not have freedoms, it was not able to discover the truth. Usually, it could only respond – even negatively – to the paradigm presented by the Communists. The intelligentsia operated against themselves, locked in the communist cage. It's a classical imprisoned mind. The only non-toxic alternative was faith-based church, but not the modernistic games of leftist Catholics.

What happened to that desert after 1989?

- Exactly. It was on this desert that a mirage of western secularism started to appear, including the western-created paradigm of Polish-Jewish relations introduced in Poland by Jan Tomasz Gross and his supporters. And Polish intelligentsia went for it. Nature hates vacuums. It couldn't patiently wait until it creates its own vision of the Polish-Jewish past. It accepted a ready and modern vision. The pre-war vision was a completely different anachronism. And the products of historians are not treated with trust by the intelligentsia. On one side, Polish intelligentsia feels that communist "scientists" are still dominant. In addition, they changed into liberals now and cloned themselves, promoting miserable people like themselves, controlling the Soviet-style humanistic "education" in Poland. It is them who discovered the Holocaust and are promoting the ultrapessimistic and extremely critical version of Polish history. On the other side, Polish intelligentsia considers anything positive about Poland to be nationalistic.

Polish intelligentsia is buying that?

- Not entirely. It rejects, to some degree, both optimistic and pessimistic Polish school. Polish authorities are in deep crisis. That is why western intellectuals like Norman Davies, Stanislaw Cloud, or Lynne Olson are popular. If a Polish author wrote something similar, triumphalistic about Division 303, he would be ignored or ridiculed for being nationalistic. And that's how foreigners are teaching Poles about their beautiful history. And Norman Davies's opinions on Polish-Jewish relations are widely accepted in Poland. So, if Jan Zaryn writes something, it never leaves a closed circle of specialists. But when Norman Davies writes something based on Zaryn, he is praised. It is important to remember that professor Davies, in some western, influential circles is considered an "apologist of Polish anti-Semitism." Our intelligentsia does not understand this, it scratches their heads. But in the beginning, when Jedwabne was discussed, without any opposition, they themselves received a dosage of the same anti-Davis school, which is represented here by Gross.

Are Gross's facts trustworthy? Can you give examples where his examples are not true?

- I gave a couple of examples above, for example about intellectuals, who only pass for intellectuals when they support communists. Here are couple more examples. In the most shocking example Gross describes Soviet occupied Poland in the years 1944-1947 as "independent Poland" (pg. 82). But the country was enslaved by Stalin.

Before that Gross argues that Ribbentrop – Molotov Pact from August 1939 "eliminated for the next two years anti-Nazi communist underground in Poland" (pg.4). And then he quotes a part of the pact. First, this quoted part deals with Soviet – Nazi partnership in eliminating Polish nationalist underground. Secondly,

under the Nazi occupation before June 1941, the communist underground was present and active. Part of it was Soviet agents, and Mieczyslaw Moczar was one of the participants. The rest of the members was limited to self-education and it adjusted to the conditions provided by the nationalist-socialist ally. The minority of the underground thought that the collaboration with the Nazis was necessary. And again, Gross does not know the facts – he did not bother to read a work by Dr. Piotr Gontarczyk or our compendium of secret communist documents.

Some people might say that it's just a detail. But Gross uses a similar approach to different cases. In general, he supports the communist model of history of the "resistance movement." He ignores the Soviet and Nazi occupations. And he uses communist terminology.

According to him, the entrance of the Soviet army in 1944 was an act of "liberation" (pg.7). Then he writes about "repatriated" people from eastern Poland (pg. 22). Naturally, he means the exiled and relocated people who were put in the so called "Folk" Poland from their homes in the eastern ends of Poland.

The robbery of land is called "land redistribution that truly benefited recipients" (pg. 18). Author did not even mention that – as proven by Dr. Lukasz Kaminski or Wojciech Jakubowski – peasants usually rejected the land. First, they did not want to rob others. Secondly, the people who did accept the land soon realized that the plots were too small to function economically.

Gross completely ignores the work of Lukasz Kaminski and others regarding the widespread popularity of opposition to communism after 1944. He even argues that "for the most part, people reconciled themselves to the new rulers, went on with their lives as well as they could, and did not nurture a combustible hatred for Communism ready to explode into destructive fury at the slightest opportunity" (pg. 246). Unfortunately, he does not provide the sources of his "knowledge."

Gross also completely ignores the research of young historians from the IPN (Institute of National Memory) regarding the anticommunist underground. He despises the anti-Soviet rebels as "various hotheads, misfits, and self-serving opportunists" (pg.21). Such statements, not supported by any research whatsoever, hurt the research done by IPN historians such as Ryszard Smietanka-Kruszelnicki, Tomasz Lobuszewski, Kazimierz Krajewski, Adam Dziuba, Zdzislaw Zblewski, Piotr Niwinski, Slawomir Poleszak, and Rafal Wnuk. Such enunciations are also not valid in the light of research by Jerzy Slaski, Anna Grazyna Kister, Leszek Zebrowski, Krystyna Pasiuk, Jan Ziolk, Ewa Kurek, or Grzegorz Wasawski. Gross doesn't even include them in his bibliography.

Despite that, Gross argues that there was a "civil war" going on in Poland (he makes references to that on pages 28 and 35). This is some sort of misunderstanding, but in the light of all of his arguments, the lack of logic is not surprising at all. On one side, he argues that there was a "civil war" going on in Poland. On the other, he argues that Kielce Pogrom was the greatest pogrom in Europe in the time of peace. In that case, was there war in Poland, or was there peace?

It can also be mentioned that Chelm Lubeski is not a "small village" but a middle sized city (pg. 13) and Adam Humer (Umer) was not of Jewish heritage (pg. 227). It can be argued that Gross, alongside of ex-communist Krystyna Kerstenowa and post-communists Czeslaw Madajczyk and Czeslaw Luczak, arbitrarily decreases the number of Polish Christians that died during the war to two million.

In general, "Fear" is missing a lot of facts and bibliographical entries.

It seems like Gross acquired most of his sources from assistants and his fellow researchers and friends, including Natalia Aleksion and Zbigniew Nawrocki. Sometimes when Gross gets the documents on a platter, he still has problems with interpretations. For example, Gross received the file of Major Wladyslaw Sobczynski of UB (Securities Office). He didn't realize that, or didn't want to realize that, Sobczynski was a head of UB in Rzeszow before he held that function in Kielce (pg. 235). He was present at the attempt to start a pogrom in Rzeszow in August 1945. After that anti-Jewish provocation, in which militia and UB was present, the Jews from that area were forced out.

In both Rzeszow and Kielce there were accusations of ritual murder. Gross admits that what happened in Rzeszow was a plot against a Jewish man, where militia "found" bloody clothes of a murdered child with that man. Lots of people showed up, creating a pogrom atmosphere. In the end there was no pogrom, but the Jews fled Rzeszow. Similar situation happened in Kielce. But Gross does not see an analogy, and does not include the role of Sobczynski (pg. 73-80).

It is worth to mention that Gross believes that Catholics are guilty of a "ritual murder" on the Jews. He states, "in the matter of ritual murder accusations, we may identify a directly associated reverse practice, which has never been widely discussed as a contested issue of Catholic-Jewish relations. I have in mind the 'ritual murder' of Jewish children by Catholic clergy, which took place, in a manner of speaking, every time a Jewish child was baptized without a specific request or authorization by his or her parents" (pg. 162). In that matter Gross despises the way in which Jewish children were saved during the Holocaust.

Jan Tomasz Gross "Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation" (New York: Random House, 2006).